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# THE POLITICS OF ANTI-AUSTERITY IN LIVERPOOL: A MORE-THAN-CUTS APPROACH

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THESIS SUBMITTED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the politics of anti-austerity in Liverpool, UK. Through a politically-engaged activist ethnography, interviews with anti-austerity activists and city councillors, and content analysis, the research explores how both grassroots actors and Liverpool City Council conceptualise and politicise austerity, as well as how they imagine, or begin to enact, political alternatives to austerity. In response to growing calls from geographers to interrogate the situatedness of anti-austerity politics, this thesis adopts an explicitly spatial reading of the organic evolution of anti-austerity resistance. Through so doing, it illustrates how a crisis that was initially sparked by mortgage defaults in the US has resulted, a decade later, in the contested reshaping of what a Liverpudlian political identity is, or should be. Accordingly, this thesis critiques dominant structuralist accounts that depict people and place as passive victims in the roll-out of austerity politics, which lead to politically disempowering analyses. The research considers what the potentialities and limits are to the conduct of anti-austerity politics at the municipal scale, and reveals that Liverpool City Council's strategy of austerity-inspired urban entrepreneurialism, coupled with more nuanced strategies to pursue social justice within a competitive neoliberal environment, was dominant. The voices of grassroots activists were unheard in public political debate, and their politics was constrained by a number of structural and strategic dysfunctions.

The thesis advances a 'more-than-cuts' framework which views both institutional and grassroots actors as conscious agents in the mediation and contestation of anti-austerity politics within the locale. Liverpool City Council pursued a rhetorically antagonistic/strategically cooperative relationship with successive Conservative-led central governments, through which austerity was embraced as the transformative catalyst for institutional change. Central to this was the council's mobilising of a vision of Liverpool's historic entrepreneurial spirit as part of an aggressive strategy to construct new relational political identities *vis-à-vis* national and international politics. Likewise, resistance by grassroots activists – envisioned as an assemblage – cannot be read as merely reactive, localised or defensive, despite seemingly failing to advance credible political alternatives. Although their original demands were not realised, they were able to contest the political landscape. The spatial examination that this study undertakes demonstrates how grassroots conceptions of anti-austerity were constitutive of new political identities and solidarities, and discusses how these were produced at the intersection of different trajectories of resistance, both past and present. Conceptually, the more-than-cuts framework shows how anti-austerity politics involves the articulation of wider political imaginaries. Empirically, this thesis suggests that, although the period of research

represented a relatively dormant period for radical politics in the city, struggles over austerity reshaped existing local political networks, and contributed to the elaboration of a broader (national) anti-austerity politics. The assemblage helped pave the way for the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party in September 2015. As a result, there is newfound potential for radical challenges to neoliberalism at the local and national scales. The research consequently identifies possibilities for the articulation of new forms of progressive localism through which political alternatives might flourish. Given the rise of both regional devolution and Brexit, which are set to impact upon Liverpool and elsewhere, this is a pressing task that must be addressed if the pursuit of social justice is to be realised.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Finally, this is a thesis about place. So, to Liverpool.

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

I feel sorry for people who think that [setting an illegal budget] will actually make a difference, because these people genuinely think that if I set an illegal budget then every other council in the country would follow suit and we'd bring the government down. Now that failed in the '80s and it's gonna fail today. (Mayor Joe Anderson, on *Radio City Talk*, 10 November 2014).

*On the evening of 6 March 2014, around a hundred protestors gathered outside Liverpool Town Hall, uniting around the now familiar chant, "No ifs, no buts, no public sector cuts!" The crowd was made up of socialists, trade unionists and anti-cuts activists, acting in alliance with library and children's centre campaigners, to oppose the latest round of cutbacks to local authority funding. The three-year budget that was eventually agreed by the council led to libraries, youth clubs, leisure centres, children's centres, social care provision and waste collection services each being axed, pared back, or transferred to other organisations, as well as the loss of over 300 public sector jobs. For Liverpool City Council, protestors simply did not understand the full financial facts or, worse, were simply trying to play politics with the issue. Yet, in the mid-1980s, against much less severe cuts, the Labour-led city council refused to cut services, and mobilised 20,000 strong crowds in support of an illegal budget, an action which provoked a historic confrontation with the Conservative central government, led by Margaret Thatcher. The protest in March 2014 represented just the latest battle in an ongoing dispute between anti-cuts campaigners and the city council, which has continued to dominate local political debate.*

### 1.1 Austerity Imposition in the UK

The last ten years in North America and Europe have been subject to the political and economic rationality of austerity. The emergence of austerity politics has its roots in the global financial crisis in 2007-8, and the resulting public deficit incurred from the transfer of private debt onto the state; public spending was slashed, and wages frozen. In the UK, the then Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government (hereafter Coalition), which ran from May 2010 to May 2015, imposed an unprecedented wave of austerity policies under the auspices of deficit reduction and 'responsible' financial management. The Coalition warned that "tough decisions need to be taken in order to reduce the unprecedented deficit" (HM Treasury, 2010: 6), as the financial crisis became reframed first as a fiscal crisis and then, subsequently, as a welfare crisis. Despite their pledge not to "allow the poorest people in

Britain to pay an unfair price for the mistakes of the richest” (Conservative Party, 2010: 6), the Coalition pursued the deepest sustained periods of cuts to public spending since World War II (Farnsworth, 2011). Prime Minister David Cameron (2010a) attempted to assure the country:

I didn’t come into politics to make cuts; we’re tackling the deficit because we have to – not out of some ideological zeal. This is a government led by people with a practical desire to sort out this country’s problems, not by ideology.

Austerity politics were therefore framed as inevitable, unquestionable and detached from any ideology, instead packaged as a practical and common sense series of budgetary logics. Indeed, the core premise of austerity – that you cannot spend more than you have, and that you cannot cure debt with more debt – gained intuitive and popular appeal in the wake of the crisis (YouGov, 2015). This was despite the political project of austerity identifying the core components of welfarism and public services as the foremost targets for fiscal retrenchment or withdrawal. In May 2015, the primary instigator of austerity politics, the Conservative Party, won a surprise twelve-seat majority in the UK General Election, and austerity politics appeared to have been consolidated as the new common sense. Some critical scholars identified the depoliticisation of austerity politics at a variety of scales (Haughton *et al.*, 2016; Peck, 2012; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014), and others noted the lack of political alternatives that had emerged (Dean, 2012; Worth, 2013). This occurred concurrently with the scholarly positioning of austerity politics within the broader trajectories of neoliberalism, where the intensification of conditionality in welfare, and individuals’ economic rationality, reinforces neoliberal ideals of individual responsibility, self-motivation and the superiority of markets. These ideals were then presented as economic and moral imperatives to restore growth, reduce the budget deficit and even fix a ‘broken society’ (HM Treasury, 2010).

Tellingly, austerity politics were met with relatively muted urban activism in the UK, particularly when compared to its European counterparts. In Spain, four of the five biggest cities are now currently governed by anti-austerity coalitions, which emerged from the grassroots *Indignados* movement, itself formed through widespread discontent at elites’ handling of the crisis (Davies, 2017a). In Greece, left-wing *Syriza* constitute the largest party in government, and austerity has been opposed through the flourishing of autonomous practices and solidarity initiatives (Arampatzi, 2017a). The turn to radical left politics in parts of Europe paralleled an increasing discontent with the centre-left parties. Elected on manifestos proclaiming to oppose austerity, many had been seemingly guilty of collaborating with pro-austerity coalitions, or had otherwise failed to enact progressive alternatives when in power, instead being lured into a ‘politics of no alternative’. The UK, however, had not witnessed similar mobilisations. With the Labour Party complicit in accepting the terms of

austerity, and the first-past-the-post voting system denying a plurality of electoral parties in parliament, a politics of anti-austerity was kept distant from parliamentary debate. In turn, grassroots responses tended to remain focused upon single-issue campaigns, such as mobilising against the closure of public libraries, the imposition of welfare conditionality and penalties, and the removal of certain subsidies or benefits, but were often seen as ephemeral, isolated and defensive struggles that did not resonate with a wider programme of political alternatives to austerity (Kushner and Kushner, 2013). It was therefore widely held that the political right had mobilised the crisis much more effectively than the left (Bailey *et al.*, 2016; Srnicek and Williams, 2015).

However, the May 2015 General Election began to see the polarisation of public political discourse, seeing electoral boosts to the Green Party, on the left, and, even more so, to the far-right UK Independence Party (UKIP). These parties, from competing perspectives, sought to capitalise on growing disillusionment with parliamentary politics, and the erosive effects of austerity measures (Winlow *et al.*, 2015). The political consensus was finally breached when, in September 2015, socialist MP Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader of the Labour Party on an explicitly anti-austerity platform. For some, the rise of Jeremy Corbyn represented a potential fracturing of neoliberal hegemony, and the possibility of shaping a new political landscape (Massey, 2015). By summer 2016, the Conservative Government had formally abandoned its target of reaching a budget surplus by the end of its five-year term in 2020; austerity, it appeared, had disappeared from public debate. Yet, to date, there has been no wholesale reversal of the significant cuts that had taken place to public services and welfare, leading to the question of whether austerity has simply become normalised as a political phenomenon, and/or whether alternative political processes – such as Britain’s decision to leave the EU (Brexit) – have replaced it at the level of public discourse. This research took place within this broader political context from June 2014 to February 2016, a period largely dominated by the perceived politics of no alternative. Turning to Liverpool, it examines how these spatially extensive political and economic processes operate at a single local level.

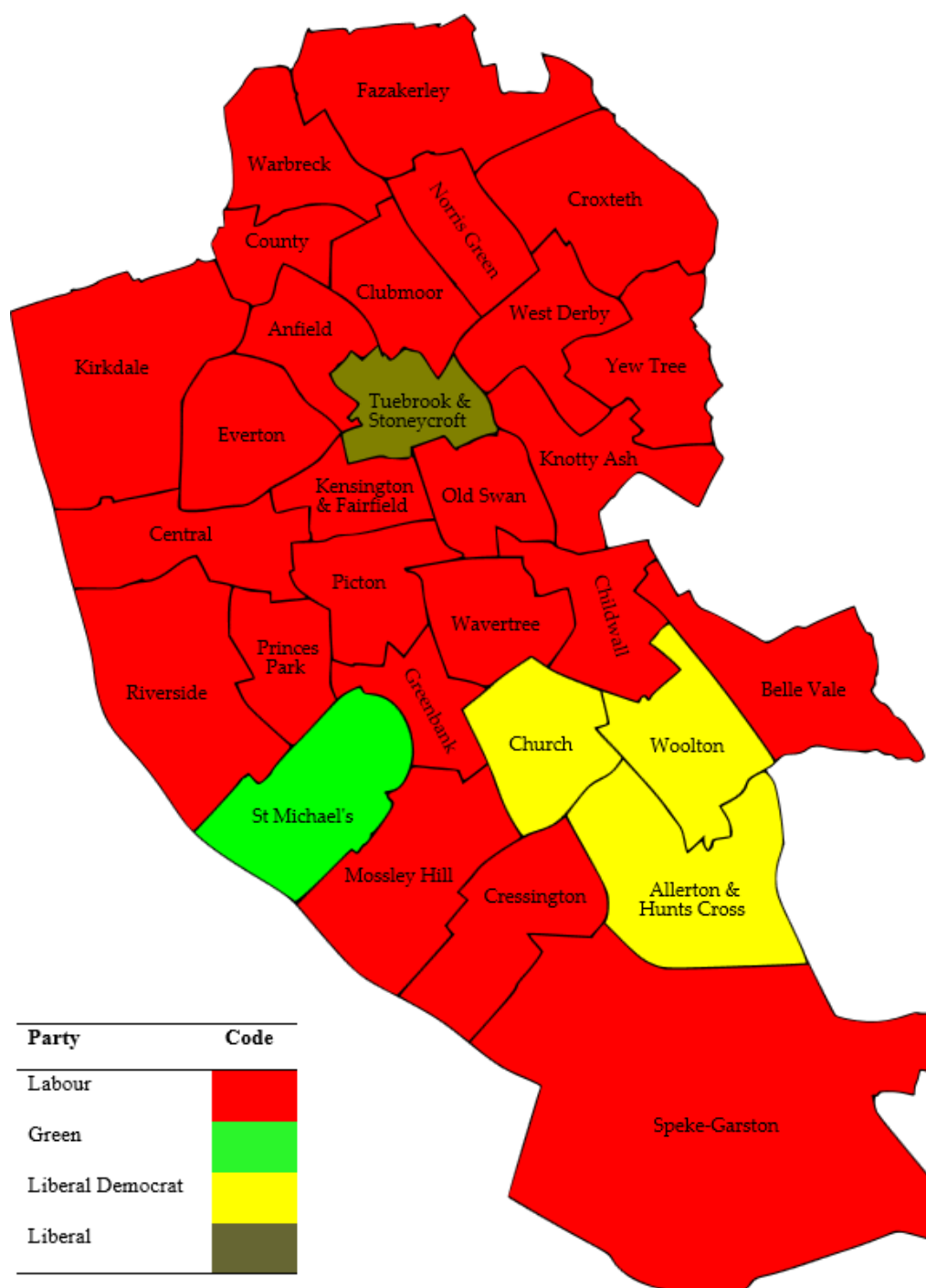
## **1.2 Localising Austerity: The Case of Liverpool**

Liverpool, located in the north-west of England, is one of the largest cities in the UK, with an estimated population of 484,600 (ONS, 2011). The city forms the urban core of the recently devolved Liverpool City Region, which conglomerates the nearby local authority districts of Halton, Knowsley, Sefton, St Helens, and Wirral, and the city is a key focus of regional economic development plans. *Figure 1.1* illustrates its geographical location within Britain, and *Figure 1.2* depicts Liverpool’s electoral wards in relation to the political make-up of the city council. Liverpool has experienced a profoundly difficult process of adjustment to global

economic change, but, by the mid-2000s, had begun to experience a socio-economic revival and population growth, and had started to reverse many of the negative perceptions with which the city had become associated. This transition was accompanied by significant physical regeneration of the city centre, the boosting of the visitor economy following its year in 2008 as European Capital of Culture, and improved governance and local economic development (Kennett *et al.*, 2015). However, as recently as 2010, Liverpool remained the most deprived local authority in England and Wales, ranked first out of a total of 354 (Meegan *et al.*, 2014).



**Figure 1.1:** Liverpool City Region and the North West of England within Britain (Source: Sykes *et al.*, 2013).



**Figure 1.2:** Composition of Liverpool City Council following May 2016 Local Elections, by Electoral Ward (After: Teale, 2016).

In the UK, since around 60 per cent of their finance comes from central government, local authorities have been particularly vulnerable to austerity measures. Government funding typically includes a variety of specific grants designed to reflect need; the result is that more deprived areas have tended to suffer disproportionately from central government cuts, with cities in northern England most adversely affected. Liverpool is one of those cities. By 2017, Liverpool City Council had lost £420 million of funding since 2010, equivalent to a 68 per

cent cut in real terms (Liverpool City Council, 2017a). This reduction was compounded by the fact that, particularly during the post-2008 recession, deprived areas were more dependent upon state welfare precisely at the time it was removed. This illustrates how austerity is also a profoundly spatial phenomenon; subnational economies responded to the crisis in different ways, according to their resilience, as well as to how funding reductions were managed and mediated through the city's politics and institutions. In recognition, Meegan *et al.* (2014) have advanced the notion of 'variegated austerity', reflecting the ways in which austerity becomes manifest within certain local contexts. Since 2010, austerity has been *the* major challenge to Liverpool's continued economic revival, and has been the number one item on the political agenda. In 2011 – shortly after austerity began – 85 per cent of Liverpool households acknowledged the impact of austerity, while 44 per cent stated that it had a 'very/fairly' big impact (Kennett *et al.*, 2015). The city's (Labour) Mayor, Joe Anderson, has repeatedly appealed to central government to reconsider funding for the city, and earlier warned that the cuts might "cause riots" (Joe Anderson, quoted in BBC News, 2012: n.p.).

Interestingly, Liverpool also displays particular historical and political geographies which make it ripe for analysis within the current conjuncture. Liverpool is considered to harbour a distinct political identity, and has a national reputation as a site of left-leaning political activism. The city has long lacked formal Conservative Party elected representation; the last MP served in 1983, and the last Conservative Councillor was in 1998. Yet, considering the experiences of the 1980s, the Labour city council has repeatedly claimed that alternatives to opposing austerity are not credible. Still, in summer 2016, following the rise of Jeremy Corbyn, the *Guardian* chose to focus on Liverpool in a series of articles which sought to examine the state of contemporary left politics in what it termed "the reddest city in the UK" (*Guardian*, 2016: n.p.).

### 1.3 Making Sense of Austerity: The Lacuna

In the southern European context, social movement scholars have been keen to celebrate the emergence of radical alternatives to neoliberalism (Douzinas, 2013), whereas others have commented on the lack of contestation in supposedly post-politicised, neoliberalised, northern European and US societies (Peck, 2017a). However, a relative lack of scholarly engagement means that we understand much less about those 'actually existing' forms of anti-austerity contestation that are emerging from below in the UK, bar some notable exceptions (NEF, 2014; Nolan and Featherstone, 2015; Tyler, 2013a). Hitherto, theorisations of austerity have appeared from macro-political perspectives which emphasise capital flows (Harvey, 2010), within electoral studies (Talving, 2017) and post-politics (Haughton *et al.*, 2016), and there has been a welcome focus on the cultural politics and affective experiences of austerity



(Bramall, 2013; Coleman, 2016; Hall, 2016). Yet, none of these conceptual frameworks is sufficient to account for the diverse meanings and outcomes of austerity, and each have underemphasised the organic evolution of anti-austerity resistance. This lacuna is characterised by an underplaying of the ways in which austerity has been mediated locally, and contested through particular histories, geographies, and place-based politics, leading to the (re)production of politically disempowering analyses which pose places as simple victims of the structural forces of austerity, and deny agency to oppositional forces, which are instead prefigured to fail. While some recent literature has sought to rectify this oversight by encouraging scholars to consider those geographies of austerity imposition (Fuller and West, 2017), this work remains disengaged with those grassroots groups who are actively seeking to repoliticise austerity politics. This thesis therefore addresses this lacuna, and engages with the actually existing forms of anti-austerity contestation that emerged in Liverpool during the research period. In turn, the research was undertaken from a standpoint that was politically engaged and critically committed to local anti-austerity politics, and the thesis is written from the perspective of a researcher who sought to promote political alternatives to austerity.

#### **1.4 Research Aim and Themes**

The *research aim* was thus:

- To understand the politics of anti-austerity within the Liverpool context.

The following research themes emerged from my immersion within the anti-austerity milieu, which is reflective of the gradual development of an engaged critique of the anti-austerity politics practiced in the city. The *research themes* which guided this project are therefore:

1. How do ‘anti-austerity’ individuals, groups and organisations in Liverpool make sense of austerity and anti-austerity?
2. How is austerity mediated through Liverpool City Council?
3. Are political alternatives to austerity emerging in the city? If so, what are they, and what are their potentialities and limits?
4. What is the relationship between the practices of anti-austerity and Liverpoolian political identities?

The thesis makes a number of empirical and theoretical interventions. Most significantly, it develops a novel, ‘more-than-cuts’ framework for conceptualising anti-austerity politics in Liverpool, where resistance is understood as something that transcends merely opposing cuts, and is instead articulated towards crafting new political landscapes, in ways which refute post-political assertions that resistance is simply reactive, localised, or unproductive. The research

also demonstrates how resistance is intertwined with particular histories and geographies of place, where anti-austerity politics provide the vehicle through which new meanings of place, and new political identities and solidarities, are produced. This illustrates how the politics of austerity and anti-austerity cut across place, where a crisis that was initially sparked by mortgage defaults in the US has resulted, ten years later, in the remaking of place-based identities in Liverpool. The thesis further shows how, contrary to structuralist interpretations, austerity is being seized as a moment of opportunity by the municipal government to fundamentally restructure urban governance and, with it, civil society. These themes are interwoven throughout the empirical chapters of the thesis, which themselves act as conceptual sub-frames through which the more-than-cuts framework is elaborated upon.

## **1.5 Thesis Structure**

This thesis is structured into eight chapters, of which the first two situate the thesis within the academic literature. **Chapter Two** plots a route through the complex histories and geographies of Liverpool in order to locate, and explore, the (re)formation of political identities in the city. The chapter introduces the notion of ‘Liverpool exceptionalism’, which proposes that the city embodies unique characteristics and tendencies which alienate it culturally and politically from mainstream British society (Belchem, 2006a). Continuing this theme, the chapter reviews the wealth of literature which supports the view that Liverpool is different. In examining the construction of this identity, the chapter proceeds through the twentieth-century trajectory of Liverpool, from the early development of working-class identities and left politics in the city, through to socio-economic collapse beginning in the 1970s, to Liverpool’s revival in the present period. Outlining the historical and geographical context of Liverpool is important for later interrogating how austerity is mediated through specific local circumstances.

**Chapter Three** provides an overview of the critical literature on austerity. The chapter situates austerity within its broader historical, geographical and political context, and positions the thesis within the wider conceptual landscape. It reviews the different frameworks which have theorised austerity, and considers the possibilities and limits of each approach. An examination of the genealogy of austerity politics positions it within the broader trajectory of neoliberalism, which has implications for the practice of anti-austerity politics. The chapter concludes that the literature has failed to incorporate an analysis of the diverse histories and geographies of anti-austerity resistance, and suggests the potential value of adopting an explicitly spatial approach to conceptualising anti-austerity politics. Chapter Three provides a general overview of the critical literature, and the subsequent empirical chapters utilise the specific literature to analyse the research findings.

**Chapter Four** discusses the methodological approach through which the aims and objectives of the thesis are examined. The chapter places the research epistemology within feminist and poststructuralist arguments which seek to embrace the political aims of research. This thesis therefore represents a radical departure from scholarly orthodoxies of academic knowledge extraction towards facilitating the production of partisan knowledge. The chapter then discusses how Liverpool was chosen as the study site owing to the proclaimed distinct political identity, and as one of the foremost sites of austerity imposition in the UK. Chapter Four then examines the rationale which informed the specific research design, which included a 21-month ‘activist ethnography’, 26 activist interviews ‘as conversations’, nine semi-structured interviews with councillors representing Liverpool City Council, and content analysis. The chapter then reflects upon the research positionality – including, critically, how it *changed* – and considers the practical and epistemological potentialities and limitations of this overall methodological approach. Specifically, working across the complex terrain of heterogeneous and ideologically-diverse political groups is highlighted as a major challenge. In turn, the chapter offers some lessons for those seeking to undertake politically-engaged social movement research.

Three empirical chapters follow. **Chapter Five** examines how Liverpool City Council is responding to central government cuts. The thesis critiques the dominant conceptual framework of ‘austerity urbanism’ (Peck, 2012), which portrays municipal governments as submissively implementing austerity measures in ways consistent with techno-managerialism. Instead, the chapter holds that such structuralist accounts fail to fully consider how the politics of austerity are mediated by a local authority and other institutional actors. Austerity politics, therefore, become (re)framed and actualised according to certain place-specific contexts. This chapter contributes to emerging literature which locates austerity urbanism as a highly variegated process, and answers Fuller and West’s (2017) invitation to explore the ‘geographies of austerity urbanism’. The major theoretical contribution is that local government is a strategic actor in the enactment, negotiation and contestation of local forms of austerity imposition and that, through this, the possibilities for alternatives to austerity at the municipal scale depend upon particular mobilisations of place-based discourses and identities. Liverpool City Council is seen, at once, to rhetorically contest central government cuts and yet, paradoxically, embrace austerity as the transformative catalyst to reshape urban governance.

In contrast, **Chapter Six** responds to calls to engage critically with those actually existing forms of anti-austerity resistance that are emerging ‘from below’. In doing so, the chapter critiques post-political accounts which emphasise the totality of neoliberal discourses and the unproductive nature of contemporary oppositional movements. The chapter observes how

anti-austerity politics are not simply reactive, localised, or defensive, but articulate broader political imaginaries which have the potential to reshape the political landscape and rework the terms upon which austerity is enacted. Additionally, it explores how the performance of anti-austerity politics relies upon highly contextualised strategies of Liverpoolian resistance, which reflect the particular histories and geographies of the city. However, Chapter Six also discusses how grassroots resistance struggled to attain popular credibility during the period of research, and failed to effectively challenge Liverpool City Council's appeals for the necessity to impose austerity at the municipal scale. The effectiveness of grassroots resistance was further limited by a number of structural and strategic dysfunctions that hindered the movement, which the chapter investigates in depth. Despite this, the thesis promotes a more-than-cuts framework which demonstrates the productivity of anti-austerity politics in repoliticising the crisis and thereby reshaping the contemporary political terrain. Chapters Five and Six reflect the competing perspectives which dominated public political discourse in Liverpool during the research period. This thesis takes the standpoint decision to provide the right of reply to grassroots anti-austerity groups, hence the order of chapters.

**Chapter Seven** argues that, for a fuller elaboration of anti-austerity politics as more-than-cuts, the geographies of this resistance must be more fully explored. In turn, the theoretical contribution is that the histories and geographies of past struggles, and the different political identities and agencies that they have produced, are central to the crafting of contemporary political imaginaries. Focusing on the micropolitics of movement activity, as well as the political biographies of participants, the chapter interrogates how anti-austerity activism is motivated and sustained. It reveals that participants rely upon particular spatial imaginaries in order to make sense of, and help shape, their own political identities. This is important in understanding why individuals partake and persist in anti-austerity activism, even though the stakes are significantly raised against them. Taking a spatial reading, the chapter shows that new visions of what Liverpool is, or should be, are being articulated. Therefore, anti-austerity politics can be understood as a vehicle through which the past is (re)interpreted, new stories are told, and new meanings of place come to the fore. The results are indicative of the ways in which anti-austerity is productive of new political agencies and identities.

In conclusion, **Chapter Eight** brings together these conceptual sub-frames into a coherent whole. It emphasises the necessity of reading contemporary anti-austerity politics as more-than-cuts, and reflects upon the possibilities and limits for alternatives to austerity within the current conjuncture. The thesis concludes by considering the potential for radical social change, particularly in light of political developments that took place following the period of research, including the election of Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour Party and

the parallel emergence of the campaign group *Momentum*, Brexit, and the snap June 2017 General Election. Finally, some further avenues for research are suggested.

## Chapter Two

### ‘Militant Liverpool’ and the Politics of Place

#### 2.1 Introduction

In their edited collection, *Liverpool: City of Radicals* (2011), Belchem and Biggs invoke the notion of Liverpool ‘exceptionalism’, which emphasises ‘scouse’ ‘otherness’ and eulogises the city as embodying unique characteristics and tendencies which make it “uncontrollable, anarchic, separate, and alienated from mainstream ‘middle’ England” (Belchem and Biggs, 2011: 1). Facing outwards towards the Irish Sea, Liverpool is *in* England but not *of it* (Belchem, 2006a, 2006b), with a maritime culture historically determined by the vagaries of the tide helping to shape an ‘edgy city’ and ‘edgy people’ more accustomed to patterns of movement and irregularity than to fixity or stability (Higginson and Wailey, 2006). The prevailing result, according to this thesis, is a local population who identify more as citizens of the world than as denizens of the nation (Marren, 2016). While Liverpool exceptionalism is contested, not least for its tendency to romanticise or mythologise the Liverpudlian identity (Williams, 2011), a wealth of literature nonetheless supports the view that Liverpool is *different* (Baxter, 1972; Carmichael, 1993; Du Noyer, 2002; Frost and North, 2013; Lane, 1987; Lowes, 2012; Munck, 2003; Murden, 2006). Therefore, whilst Liverpool’s ‘foundational story’ has been relayed myriad times, through often competing and contrasting narrations (Sykes *et al.*, 2013), these accounts each concede the particularisms of Liverpool’s place-based politics and acknowledge that understandings firmly rooted in local circumstance cannot easily be extrapolated to other areas. Indeed, for Carmichael (1993: 388), Liverpool’s apparent peculiarities “are easily translated into normality once set in the context of the city’s history and the character and composition of its working class population” (see also Lane, 1987).

This chapter plots a route through the complex histories and geographies of Liverpool in order to explore, and situate, the (re)formation of political identities in the city. This answers Fuller’s (2017) call to engage with the various geographical spaces in which austerity urbanism ‘touches down’ and is mediated through local contexts. The chapter theorises political identities as actively constituted through struggle and the ongoing negotiation of power, antagonisms and solidarities (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), and opines that those histories and geographies of struggle matter precisely because they exact both possibilities and limits for contemporary political activity (Featherstone, 2008). These particularisms do not provide a “fixed blueprint” (Featherstone, 2005: 265), but serve instead as a “reservoir of memories” (Guzman-Concha, 2012: 409) which help to frame new struggles and afford political agency

to resistance movements. In line with relational accounts of the spatialities of resistance, which see place-based political imaginaries as being constructed in relation to their connections to other struggles and processes, across time and space, rather than as a result of local circumstance (Featherstone, 2003), the chapter locates Liverpoolian working-class identities as diverse, fragmented and plural, produced by an assemblage of different actors, groups and institutions acting in both solidarity and contestation (Marren, 2016). Moreover, space is read not as a mere container for protest; rather, social movements actively produce place through political struggle and, in turn, place helps shape political subjectivities (Auyero, 2007; della Porta, 2013; Nicholls *et al.*, 2013). Finally, the chapter examines the contributory factors to political mobilisation in the city, for grievances alone are insufficient (Fainstein and Fainstein, 1985; Tarrow, 1998). Instead, it is necessary to explore how those grievances are constructed and contested (Snow *et al.*, 1986), and the political topographies upon which they are located (Featherstone, 2008). This chapter thus outlines the contemporary 'political imaginary' (Featherstone, 2005) of Liverpool and considers how various protest movements and community initiatives have hitherto crafted political agency in the city.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as O'Brien (2011: 141) asserts, "it seems safe to conjecture that [Liverpool's] national reputation as a place of left-leaning political activism remains".

To this end, the chapter proceeds as follows. First, it locates the early development of working-class identities and left politics in the city (2.2, 2.3), before charting the twentieth-century socio-economic decline of Liverpool (2.4), discussing the city's socio-economic collapse since the early 1970s, and the role this played in fostering an oppositional identity. Thereafter, the chapter explores how Liverpool's working classes responded to this urban decline (2.5), with particular focus on the embracement of radical Trotskyist municipal politics in the 1980s (2.6). Finally, it observes Liverpool's progression from the 1990s to the present day (2.7, 2.8) under the paradigm of 'urban entrepreneurialism' (Harvey, 1989) and, in so doing, considers the presence, role and extent of contemporary left politics in the city (2.9).

## **2.2 From a Sleepy Village**

Liverpool long resisted socialist politics (Frost and North, 2013). Once a sleepy village, its population exploded from less than 1,000 during the late seventeenth century to 78,000 by 1801 and, by the mid-1930s, to 870,000 (Sykes *et al.*, 2013). This development was sparked by the inhumane slave trade and subsequent burgeoning of its port-based economy, for which the city acquired the inglorious distinction of "Britain's leading slave port" (Longmore, 2006:

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<sup>1</sup> It would not be possible even to overview each and every struggle that Liverpool has witnessed over the past century. This chapter is instead concerned with reviewing those that, according to existent literature, have contributed most to the city's contemporary political imaginary. Other events are also cited, for further information on these, the reader is advised to consult the references provided.

132). As the port thrived during the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, migrants flocked to Liverpool from across the British Isles, her colonies and the Continent, mixing “rich linguistic and cultural diversity with festering religious sectarianism, racial segregation and systemic discrimination” (Sykes *et al.*, 2013: 303; see also Lees, 2011). For Belchem (2006a, 2006b), it was the mass immigration of the Irish – two million people passed through Liverpool during the mid-1840s as refugees of the potato famines – that acted as the catalyst for Liverpool’s divorce from Britishness. Where the Irish diaspora assimilated in neighbouring cities such as Manchester, the Liverpool Irish instead became ghettoised, due to their sheer magnitude (Belchem and Biggs, 2011), embracing a sense of dissimilarity characterised by a fierce sense of independence, rejection of the Crown, and hostility towards the British establishment (Belchem, 2006a). Belchem argues that this culture eventually permeated other (Protestant) working-class areas across the city, which became somewhat *Hibernicised* helping to forge a unique ‘scouse’ identity atypical of that displayed by the northern English working class overall (see also Marren, 2016). Beyond Belchem’s work, other ethnic groups, including the Welsh, Scottish, Italian, Jewish, Chinese and African diaspora, have each helped to shape the character of the city (Sykes *et al.*, 2013).

Despite the eventual abolition of the slave trade in 1807, the city continued to benefit from its favourable geographic location within the global economy (and the British Empire), with the city’s wealth manifest in “a plethora of grand architectural landscapes and the development of the characteristic urban infrastructure of the modern city” including mass housing, public parks, planning and sanitation (Sykes *et al.*, 2013: 299; see also Dockerill, 2017). Yet, despite being a vibrant and prosperous ‘world city’ (Wilks-Heeg, 2003a), the city remained highly polarised and socially exclusive, with much of the wealth heavily invested in south Liverpool at the expense of the slum dwellings of the city’s workforce, initially concentrated in the city centre and, later, the north (Waller, 1981). As the gateway of the British Empire, the emerging scouse identity intertwined with a broader cosmopolitan character which made the city particularly receptive to ‘foreign’ political exports such as communism, anarchism, and syndicalism, revolutionary ideas that were alien to the parliamentary socialism preferred by the British industrial working class (Belchem, 2006a; Davies, 1996; Marren, 2016). This geography allowed for the exchange of people and also political ideas. The port played refuge to Wobblies<sup>2</sup> fleeing repression in the US (Belchem, 2011), as well as to Jewish victims of pogroms in Eastern Europe (Goodman, 1996). British seafarers inspired by syndicalism began to enact these influences back home, as anarchists and syndicalists played a key role in the 1911 Transport Strike, bringing the city near to revolution (Taplin, 1994). In the 1920s an

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<sup>2</sup> The ‘Wobblies’ are members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), an international labour organisation advocating the principles of syndicalism.



IWW branch was established in Liverpool, with seafarers such as George Garrett,<sup>3</sup> who shared links with the organisation in the US (Morris *et al.*, 2017), playing a notable role in introducing radicalism to the working class (O'Brien, 2011). The IWW in Merseyside also collected funds to support members facing trial in the US (Pridmore, 2007). Such early transnationalism provides evidence of the ways in which the organisation challenged working-class segregation, a phenomenon which plagued the city at the time.

However, while labour historians have charted traditions of class solidarity as far back as the 1911 Transport Strike and later 1919 Police and 1926 General Strikes (Belchem and Biggs, 2011; O'Brien, 2011), the city suffered complex barriers to developing a proletarian consciousness and, therefore, no organised political faction emerged to champion the needs of the working class explicitly. Despite the prevailing socio-economic conditions, and unlike Manchester, where an abundance of relatively secure manufacturing and craft trades formed the basis for the development of an active labour movement, Liverpool was hampered by the complex labour structure of the dock industry, characterised by its culture of casualism and 'dog-eat-dog' work patterns, where jobs were "poorly paid and notoriously volatile" (Frost and North, 2013: 7). This was exacerbated by bitter ethno-religious divides between South Dock Catholics and North Dock Protestants, which further prevented the smooth development of a coherent working-class identity (Belchem, 2006b).

In the early twentieth century, the dominant political culture was fundamentally parochial in character, and fed off ethnic and religious rivalries (Jenkins, 2010). For example, Merseyside Socialist Research Group (hereafter MSRG) noted how sectarian rioting in north Liverpool lasted for many months in the summer of 1909 (MSRG, 1980). Following the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915, initially anti-German riots extended to generalised xenophobic rage which targeted Scandinavian, Russian, Italian and Chinese establishments (Belchem, 2007; O'Brien, 2011). Finally, in June 1919, a pub brawl between Scandinavian and West Indian seamen escalated into a full-blown race riot which saw thousands of vigilante men terrorising the homes and hostels that housed black seamen (Jenkinson, 2009). In labour politics, the working class earned a reputation for their mercurial temperament, preferring "flamboyant gestures" over the rigours of tactical thinking (Lane, 1987: 99); it was, according to one trade union activist, "an organiser's graveyard" (Lane, 1987: 101), a political backwater with few prospects for organisation.

Ethno-religious cleavages also became manifest within local formal politics; Catholics supported the Irish Nationalist Party (INP) while working-class Protestants elected

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<sup>3</sup> See Morris *et al.* (2017) for a fuller account of the types of transatlantic cosmopolitanism practised by seafarer George Garrett, and the role this played in shaping early working-class identities.

Conservatives, creating the curious phenomenon of Tory dominance in the “most proletarian of English cities” (Parkinson, 1985: 18). Religious identity was therefore a key determinant in providing the initial link between Conservatives and the Protestant working class, and Conservative socialisation in Liverpool was thereafter maintained through a strong associational network; the Working Men’s Conservative Association facilitated ready interaction between the classes, and involved Tories in working-class pastimes (Jeffery, 2017), including both football clubs (Williams, 2011). Conservatives also, arguably, exploited anti-Catholic sentiment (Belchem, 2000; Waller, 1981). This left little opportunity for a fledgling Labour Party. Socialists later argued that Liverpudlians did not lack a class consciousness *per se*, but that the forms of working-class politics championed by the Labour Party at the time held no purchase in a city wracked by casualism (MSRG, 1980). Historians concur, postulating that due to widespread sectarianism and the gerrymandered local electoral process, Liverpool working-class political expressions remained confined to riot and mob violence rather than electoral engagement or peaceful protest (Belchem, 1992; Marren, 2016).

In contrast, the interwar years saw advances for the Labour Party. This rise in support has been variously attributed to the decline of Conservative socialisation patterns (Jeffery, 2017), changes in local election codes which previously favoured the Tories (Davies, 1996), and a fall in Irish nationalism following the 1921 partition which came at the electoral expense of the INP (Kilfoyle, 2000). Indeed, the INP changed its name to the Catholic Party before finally being absorbed into the Labour Party by the late 1920s. This meant that, unlike other parts of Britain where the Labour Party replaced the radical wing of the Liberals, Liverpool Labour reflected a distinctly Irish character (Lane, 1987). It became dominated by large local families and the church, or what Peter Kilfoyle argues “amounted to a Catholic political mafia” (Kilfoyle, 2000: 7). This influence was affirmed following the (Tory-led) City Council’s sale of the former Brownlow Hill workhouse site to the Catholic Church in 1930 for the construction of the Metropolitan Cathedral; Catholic Labour councillors voted for the deal, despite the transfer of municipal land to private institutions being in contravention of party policy (MSRG, 1980). Once a sleepy village, a particular proletarian identity had thus begun to evolve, albeit not one defined by the representational politics of the Labour Party, and not within conditions ripe for the growth of progressive politics.

### **2.3 The Growing Left (1945-1970)**

Following 1945, the nature of Liverpool politics underwent a further evolution and, by 1955, the Labour Party had finally begun to reconfigure Liverpool’s political landscape, having taken power thirty years after most other northern industrial towns had been captured (Crick, 1984). In addition to the aforementioned factors, the decline of sectarianism was significant,

in part aided by the post-war redevelopment of the inner city and the subsequent decanting of inhabitants to 'overspill' estates which helped to diminish ethno-religious segregation and reinforce prosperity amongst working people (Taaffe and Mulhearn, 1988). Finally, the Labour Party appeared capable of winning support from all sections of Liverpool's working class, "both Catholic and Protestant, casual and non-casual" (MSRG, 1980: 79). However, whilst the Catholic caucus lost its grip upon the party, its right-wing influence continued, and contributed towards "a politics of personality, patronage, corruption and bossism"; a state which reached its acme in the 1950s under the iron grip of the 'Braddock machine',<sup>4</sup> but failed to dissipate long after (Parkinson, 1985: 18; Crick, 1984). Despite ostensibly hailing the inauguration of a new, progressive and democratic Labour Party on Merseyside, the Braddocks built a 'political machine' which, for socialists, signified the latest obstacle to left-wing ideals; it was "right-wing, anti-communist, boss politics of the most blatant kind" (MSRG, 1980: 80). Whilst providing an incontrovertible barrier to socialist organisation, closed party machines were in keeping with local politics at the time, and mirrored political structures commonly found in US cities with large Irish immigrant communities (Baxter, 1972; Kilfoyle, 2000). The local Conservatives also excluded Catholics (Jeffery, 2017). This affront to British liberal democratic theory once again demonstrates the exceptional nature of Liverpool's local politics. For Labour, membership was tightly controlled in order to exclude the "wrong sort of candidate" (Taaffe and Mulhearn, 1988: 36); rejected applicants were told that the party was 'full up', despite membership in Liverpool being amongst the lowest in the country (Crick, 1984; Frost and North, 2013).

Left-wing grassroots politics were confined to Walton, where the seeds of *Militant*<sup>5</sup> were laid (Crick, 1984) and, in 1955, Militant founder Ted Grant was selected as Walton's parliamentary candidate. In Liverpool, Militant had a distinctly proletarian orientation with roots in the organised labour movement. This contrasted to the left in other cities, and far-left groups such as the Workers Revolutionary Party and the Socialist Workers Party, which Militant argued were dominated by intellectuals and students (Frost and North, 2013). Militants Taaffe and Mulhearn (1988) claim that activists played a sincere and prominent role in local industrial action, showing workers that the organisation were not "Johnnie-come-latelies", a critique levelled at those other far-left groups (Hatton,<sup>6</sup> 1988: 31). The 'reds under the bed', as

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<sup>4</sup> Jack and Bessie Braddock were Communist Party members in the 1920s and, in the 1930s, as Labour councillors, led opposition to the Catholic caucus. Jack (Council Leader) and Bessie (MP) shifted rightwards in the post-war years however, and as city bosses stifled hopes of genuinely progressive Labour politics on Merseyside (Marren, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> *Militant Tendency* was a Trotskyist entryist faction of the Labour Party that became particularly strong in Liverpool during the mid-1980s, playing a dominant role in the City Council. Their significance is discussed in 2.6.

<sup>6</sup> Derek Hatton was the Deputy Leader of Liverpool City Council during its Militant heyday.

contemptuously termed by Bessie Braddock, slowly built credibility as the 'authentic' voice of the working-class on Merseyside (Crick, 1984; MSRG, 1980).

The 1960s saw Labour and the Conservatives alternate control of Liverpool City Council, both pursued largely bipartisan policies that sought to implement the preferences of their respective national governments (Crick, 1984). This was an approach which, for some, neglected the wider structural problems that Merseyside faced (MSRG, 1980). This period was characterised by disillusionment and apathy with local politics, including low turnouts (Jeffery, 2017). A further millstone for Labour was their administration of the city's 1966 Housing Plan, an extensive urban renewal and slum-clearance programme which pushed thousands of people into unpopular high-rise tower blocks and decanted up to 160,000 residents into the notorious overspill estates (Andrews, 2012; Meegan, 1989). While the slum clearances temporarily raised living standards, the programme dismantled "natural working class inner-city communities" (Parkinson, 1985: 19) such as Scotland Road, which had formerly been home to the city's Irish population (Sykes *et al.*, 2013). In addition, the Party held a very poor record of municipal service provision, which had become inefficient and expensive, further contributing to tenants' discontent (MSRG, 1980; Parkinson, 1985). By the late 1960s, Liverpool Labour was in crisis; organisationally and politically bankrupt, undemocratic, top-heavy, patronising and increasingly out-of-touch with its constituents (Parkinson, 1985). In 1973 the Liberals won an unforeseen and shattering victory, becoming the city's largest single party. The failure of Labour to manage the city's problems effectively – structural or otherwise – prompted their collapse; the Liberals merely exploited voters' disillusionment (Parkinson, 1985). Such developments demonstrated Labour's inability to cultivate a stronghold in the city, a failure made more telling when the socio-economic conditions of the time are considered.

#### **2.4 Merseyside in Crisis (1970s)**

In the 1970s, Liverpool began a transition from 'world city' to 'pariah city' (Wilks-Heeg, 2003a) characterised by severe economic decline and social unrest. For Wilks-Heeg (2003a: 49), a city "once the key driver of globalisation [had] subsequently become one of its most significant victims", whereby the city suffered the consequences of reassembling global trade patterns and the docks were rendered obsolete. The contributory factors were manifold, but included: Britain's reorientation towards Europe and the subsequent shifting of trade to its east and south coasts (North, 2017); the migration of manufacturing to the developing world (Murden, 2006); containerisation, which reduced demand for labour and undermined the city's competitive advantage to ports with greater handling space (Levinson, 2016); cheaper air travel outcompeting transatlantic passenger trade (North, 2017); the decline in the cotton trade

(Sykes *et al.*, 2013); and the introduction of neoliberal policies that insisted that cities must be fiscally independent and competitive within the global economy (Frost and North, 2013; Wilks-Heeg, 2003a). Consequently, Liverpool's population peaked at 855,688 in 1930 and, on a constant decline throughout the remainder of that century, had almost halved by 2001 (Sykes *et al.*, 2013).

This transition was initially preceded by a brief reprieve following the Second World War, with the introduction of national economic redistributive policies which sought to incentivise the relocation of growth industries, particularly motor car manufacture, to less prosperous areas of the country. Liverpool was a major recipient (Meegan, 1989). This 'carrot-and-stick' regional policy approach helped to establish an initially reluctant manufacturing industry to base itself within Merseyside, with the aim to stem job loss. This created 25,000 jobs, concomitant with a drop in unemployment to a somewhat negligible five per cent, and returned £25 million to the local economy (Meegan, 1989; Murden, 2006). The city also enjoyed a cultural revival, its new identity exemplified by the phenomenon of *Merseybeat*; Liverpool was "cheeky and young, un-posh [and] un-stuffy" (Du Noyer, 2002: 78). However, this hiatus was brief, as the majority of factories were mothballed within ten to fifteen years of their arrival (Marren, 2016); by 1977, 350 plants had closed, and Liverpool's manufacturing economy had all but collapsed (Couch, 2003). Some parts of the city, such as the Northend dockland wards of Everton and Vauxhall, suffered unemployment rates of up to 50 per cent (Marren, 2016).

In retrospect, Liverpool's flirtation with post-war industrialism could only ever produce an Indian summer. The temporary tilt towards relocation was inconsistent with the industry's historical geography; the latter ensured that Liverpool could only ever be a branch-plant town. The city's economy was thus beholden to a small number of absentee employers whose investment decisions bore no specific commitment to Merseyside (Marren, 2016). Liverpool also had "an outdated infrastructure and an underqualified labour force" (Parkinson, 1985: 9) ill-suited to the demands of factory work; former dockers were suddenly subject to the rigid constraints of factory discipline and assembly-line production. These were an anathema to casual workers, for whom independence and agency was engrained and cherished (Belchem and Biggs, 2011). Resultantly, the municipal economy was structurally weak and, with limited capacity to raise revenues, increasingly dependent upon the support of national government (Carmichael, 1993). Liverpool was "marooned on the wrong side of the country" (Lane, 1987: 45), and became a city characterised by rapid out-migration, the underutilisation of key resources and entrenched social exclusion (Sykes *et al.*, 2013). The marginalisation of the port – its very *raison d'être* – not only collapsed the city's economy, but created a social and

political void in the fabric of society (Marren, 2016). Rather than the 'beat city', Liverpool had become the 'beaten city' (Du Noyer, 2002).

Throughout the 1970s, political intervention continued, this time in the shape of community initiatives largely informed by a social pathology philosophy which maintained that "inhabitants of inner cities [need] direct help to be better able to participate in their local housing and labour markets" (Meegan, 2003: 57). Various regeneration efforts were pursued including the Urban Programme in Brunswick and the Community Development Projects (CDPs); for which Vauxhall was a precedential case (Frost and North, 2013). CDPs saw mixed teams of community activists, practitioners and academics working together in inner-city areas to analyse problems and recommend community-based solutions from a local perspective (North, 2017). However, the CDPs emphasised the structural problems that inner-city residents faced, in terms of their access to housing and labour markets, and argued for radical, systemic change; unwelcomed by local or central government, the projects were soon closed down (Alcock, 1994; Meegan, 2003). In sum, growing realisation across Merseyside held that "small palliative measures in an area devastated by global economic forces as well as local decisions are insufficient" (Frost and North, 2013); tinkering with albeit well-intentioned *ad hoc* or targeted funding was simply inadequate in order to address the city's structural deficiencies.

At this juncture, there was growing disillusionment with the efforts of national governments, which had repeatedly failed to arrest Liverpool's decline. Indeed, in 1981 the then Conservative Government considered deserting Liverpool altogether to what it termed a 'managed decline',<sup>7</sup> and in 1982, the *Daily Mirror* suggested that "they should build a fence around [Liverpool] and charge admission. For sadly, it has become a 'showcase' of everything that has gone wrong with Britain's major cities" (*Daily Mirror*, 11 October 1982, cited in Lane, 1987:11). Tory responses, such as the *Merseyside Task Force*, constituted inherent Thatcherism and were imbued with entrepreneurial tropes, but they largely failed on their own terms to bring private-sector funding to the city (Murden, 2006). Moreover, while regeneration efforts such as the restoration of Albert Dock and the 1984 International Garden Festival proved aesthetically productive, they failed to reverse the 40-50 per cent unemployment rates in targeted areas (Murden, 2006). Such failures ultimately served to colour local people's perceptions of 'special' or 'community' initiatives, and reinforced the belief that the Conservatives were either callous and uncommitted to Liverpool's problems or, at best, that

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<sup>7</sup> In 1981, following the Toxteth riots, the then Chancellor Sir Geoffrey Howe advised Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher that "we do not want to find ourselves concentrating all the limited cash that may have to be made available into Liverpool and have nothing left for possibly more promising areas [...] I cannot help feeling that the option of managed decline is one which we should not forget altogether. We must not expend all our limited resources in trying to make water flow uphill" (quoted in *Independent*, 30 December 2011).

their responses were simply inadequate (Parkinson, 1985) (see *Figure 2.1*). This chapter now turns to examining how this crisis was managed locally and, in turn, how the working-class responded this crisis.



**Figure 2.1:** The Dunlop factory facing closure, n.d. (Source: Sinclair, 2014).

## **2.5 Liverpool Fights Back?**

The result of the city's familiarity with unemployment and deprivation, married with the idiosyncratic political complexion of the city, encouraged the working class to develop particular defence mechanisms and to respond in a more vocal and aggressive manner than in other British cities (Carmichael, 1993). Whilst the policies of Thatcherism and British deindustrialisation were felt across working-class communities nationwide, Liverpool was especially vulnerable and its problems most acute. As the site of myriad failed policy initiatives, the seeds of revolt began to grow (Crick, 1984; Taaffe and Mulhearn, 1988); there was a "lingering sense of grievance germinated on Merseyside, and a working-class culture prizing resistance and fierce independence permeated the social milieu" (Marren, 2016: 26). The 1980s witnessed a series of urban protests including occupations, rent strikes, riots and industrial militancy; the city became synonymous with 'militancy' (Kilfoyle, 2000; Taaffe and Mulhearn, 1988). This section explores how local people responded to this economic and political malaise, and the "action repertoires" (Tilly, 1986: 390) they developed, in order to determine the case for Liverpoolian exceptionalism.

As previously outlined, by the early 1970s Labour was in crisis and in 1973 the Liberal Party exploited this weakness to become the largest party on the City Council. Under Sir Trevor Jones, the Liberals quickly gained a reputation for effective grassroots organisation, where

they demonstrated ongoing concern for local people and local issues (Mannin, 1987). Their emphasis on pavement politics – focused upon identifying and resolving ‘community needs’ – exposed the moribund local Labour and Conservative parties as increasingly out of touch, inept and corrupt, and turned the Liberals into a “phenomenally successful electoral machine” (Parkinson, 1985: 20; Mannin, 1987). Local Labour politician Peter Kilfoyle derides pavement politics as cynical tricks on a “gullible and near-despairing electorate” (Kilfoyle, 2000: 30) which had no broader vision (Jeffery, 2017). In terms of Tory decline on Merseyside, popular discourse holds that the region took exception to the perniciousness of Thatcherism, yet Jeffery (2017) identifies a much earlier shift due to falling Conservative socialisation patterns and the Liberals’ effective pavement politics, which allowed the latter to replace the Conservatives as the anti-socialist vote, made possible as a result of the Liberals’ close philosophical alignment with the Tories in Liverpool (Frost and North, 2013). The subsequent three-way split between the parties – induced by Labour’s domination of inner-city and perimeter council estates, and the Tories’ grip of suburban wards – ensured that the 1970s were marred by coalitions, hung councils, confusion, and impotency (Kilfoyle, 2000; Parkinson, 1985). Labour had failed the working class in office, and would remain a peripheral influence until the early 1980s.

The city failed to determine effective political solutions, whereby “decline would have been difficult to manage if the city had had enlightened leadership. That it had to endure such political incoherence instead seemed a cruel stroke of fate” (Parkinson, 1985: 24). Resultantly, necessary initiatives to arrest the city’s decline were not enacted and major problems were neglected (Parkinson, 1988). In fact, the Liberal-Conservative administrations of the coalition decade (1973-83) committed to just one objective: the reduction of net expenditure, the rationale being that spending must be in line with that of comparable local authorities, and reflect the city’s declining population (Carmichael, 1993). However, this policy failed to acknowledge that, despite having a smaller population, many services needed to continue, that service rationalisation took time, and the residual population was also the most in need (Parkinson, 1985). Both parties “persistently failed to face up to financial reality, courting electoral appeal at the expense of services and the city’s social infrastructure” (Carmichael, 1993: 393), with the result that the council’s spending was restricted to unnaturally low levels, with no money reserved for difficult times to come (Parkinson, 1985). The Liberals also sought to establish a middle-class base within the city (to resolve the deficit problem) and set low rates in order to attract private investment (Parkinson, 1988). This strategy was doomed to failure since the private sector was in retreat, and there was no local elite capable of cooperating with the council (Frost and North, 2013). Council rents increased and waiting lists for social housing were the longest in the country, maintenance services suffered huge backlogs, and the municipal house-building programme was abandoned (Frost and North,



2013; Parkinson, 1985). From the early 1980s, Labour battled ideologically to present alternatives, taking a leftwards shift concordant with other local Labour parties at the time (Crick, 1984; Mannin, 1987). This section now moves to explore working-class responses to this impotent decade, but later returns to this departure point in order to relay Liverpool's embracement of a radical Trotskyist city council in the mid-1980s.

The early 1970s represented the beginnings of resistance; as redundancies mounted, industrial relations soured (Frost and North, 2013). In 1979, the *Financial Times* asked "why, when companies choose to rationalise, [does] the blow so often fall hardest on Merseyside?" (*Financial Times*, 2 February 1979). The implicit supposition was that Merseyside's economic woes could be attributed to its 'suicidal' industrial militancy and political extremism, which displayed an antipathy to factory discipline and managerial prerogatives, and resulted in both high levels of absenteeism and labour turnover, as well as a lack of productivity and work discipline (Belchem, 2000). This characterisation was propagated by politicians, the media and local employers keen to portray Liverpool workers as 'strike-happy' and, according to Belchem (2006a: 55), to give the "whingeing militant scouser" – hostile to market realities – an ethno-cultural explanation; irrational, un-English, and derived from Celtic truculence against whom the respectable, responsible and dignified can align. The city's identity was cast as lacking entrepreneurial spirit, Thatcher famously telling the then Knowsley MP Robert Kilroy-Silk that Liverpudlians have "got no get-up-and-go" (Kilroy-Silk, 1986: 45). For Militants, this represented a vicious political assault on Merseyside's workers (Hatton, 1988), whilst others cite evidence to suggest that the popular association with workplace militancy is a myth; instead, the region simply had a higher proportion of industries which were *nationally* strike-prone (Lyddon, 2005; MSRG, 1980). Instead, it was argued that it was not the frequency of strikes which attracted national attention, but the *style* of trade unionism on Merseyside at the time (Lane, 1987; Frost and North, 2013). The introduction of manufacturing also arguably had the "unintended consequence of serving to radicalise those affected" (Lowes, 2012: 97).

In 1971-2, Liverpool witnessed a wave of factory occupations, such as those at Fisher Bendix and Lucas, whereby workers refused to accept redundancy, proposing instead that under self-management and state subsidy they could continue to operate (Frost and North, 2013). In 1978, following the shutdown of the Standard-Triumph Plant No. 2 in Speke, workers continued to provide working-class solidarity as the 'TGWU 6/612 Branch of the Unemployed', forming a community picket when jobs were threatened at Dunlop (Marren, 2016). Leaders of the 6/612 Branch were also at the forefront of the 'People's March for Jobs' to London in May 1981; as the march commenced in Liverpool, it further positioned the city as the centre of working-class resistance to Thatcherism (Marren, 2016). Finally, members of 6/612 secured the Merseyside Trade Union Community and Unemployed Resource Centre as a base for their

operations, which played a prominent role in shaping popular culture in the city (Marren, 2016).

In 1972, the Kirkby Rent Strikes were initiated following rate increases brought about by the Housing Finance Act; 3,000 tenants mobilised, with an autonomous women's group, configured by Merseyside Big Flame,<sup>8</sup> forming the Unfair Rents Action Group to coordinate a 14-month-long strike (LibCom, 2012). Militant collective organisation and solidarity no longer remained the preserve of (male) rank-and-file trade unionists, as women protested against the unfair rents and, more broadly, against the social conditions that blighted Kirkby. In 1973, a tenants' association candidate in Sandhills/Vauxhall narrowly lost to Labour leader Bill Sefton in the first elections for the new Merseyside County Council (MSRG, 1980). Liverpudlians also resisted clearance proposals relating to the proposed inner motorway (Botham and Herson, 1980) and other communities, such as the Eldonians in north Liverpool (McBane, 2008) and the Granby residents of the south, after seeing the "baleful outcomes of redevelopment, staked their claim to stay in historic core neighbourhoods" (Sykes *et al.*, 2013: 11). For Taylor (2011), the Eldonian Village represents perhaps the greatest success of grassroots activism during this time; in Vauxhall, this self-organised community fought against an actively hostile Labour council in the mid-1980s to secure a large-scale housing co-operative, on the basis of autonomy, mistrust of the council, and opposition to the modernist-inspired developments of the council's 1966 Housing Plan.

In August 1982, the Liberals opted to close Croxteth Comprehensive without consulting the community; the Croxteth Community Action Committee was formed, and local residents occupied the school and led civil disobedience before deciding to run it as Croxteth Free Community School (Frost and North, 2013; Taylor, 2011). The school was taken back under full local authority control in 1985, but the struggle empowered local people and fostered a renewed sense of community spirit (Taylor, 2011). For Taaffe and Mulhearn (1988), it was the battle over Croxteth Comprehensive, in addition to the successful struggle of trade unionists in the 'Lady at Lord John'<sup>9</sup> dispute, and the council typists' strike, which fed Labour's election victory in 1983, as Militants were at the forefront of these campaigns (see also Hatton, 1988: 45-55). Some events were less positive; in 1979, during the infamous

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<sup>8</sup> Big Flame was a Merseyside-based revolutionary socialist organisation beginning in 1971 around industrial struggles (such as the Ford plant in Halewood), which then developed branches across England. From 1972 they sought to contribute towards emerging community struggles, with their first intervention being in Tower Hill, Kirkby (Farrar, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> The dispute centred on complaints made over sexual harassment in the Lady at Lord John store in the city centre. The manageress took up these complaints and was sacked by management, and Militant supporters were prominent in a strike and pickets of the firm's stores in response. Taaffe and Mulhearn (1988) contend that this is just one example where Militant supported issues affecting working-class women.

'winter of discontent', Toxteth gravediggers gained notoriety for striking – with the Conservatives quick to generate political capital: "You couldn't even bury the dead" they cried (Kilfoyle, 2000: 70). Finally, in 1981, in the long-established black community of Toxteth, tensions exploded following years of structural social exclusion and systematically racist policing (Frost and Phillips, 2011). Whilst the 'uprising' was catalysed by escalating tensions between police and Toxteth's black youths, rioters from a variety of the city's communities subsequently joined (Marren, 2016). This was an issue around which the left – particularly the Militant-dominated *Merseyside Labour Party Young Socialists* – actively organised, proposing 'economistic' solutions to the plight of Toxteth's inner-city black youth (Marren, 2016). The Chief Constable of Merseyside responded by attributing the uprising to pathological flaws in Toxteth's black residents (Cooper, 1985), once again exemplifying the deepening chasm opening between the authorities and local residents. It was in this context, therefore, that Militant arose.

## 2.6 The Militant Council (1983-87)

The ensuing confrontation with central government marked the culmination of years of growing unrest and anti-Tory sentiment within the city (Frost and North, 2013). Following the 1979 election of a Conservative Government ideologically committed to curbing municipalism under neoliberal orthodoxy, and inspired by Thatcher's "personal distaste for [municipalism's] perceived profligacy" (Carmichael, 1993: 387), local government was exposed to a multitude of punitive legislative measures implemented to restrain public expenditure and punish 'high spending' Labour councils; Liverpool suffered bitterly (Mannin, 1987; Parkinson, 1985). Du Noyer (2002: 175) furthers that Thatcher's prejudice extended beyond local authorities to a Tory ancestral dislike of Liverpool itself; her 'corner shop' mentality – "thrifty, snobbish, respectable and narrow" – contrasted with Liverpool as "sloppy, generous, improvident, grand of gesture and sentiment". In Conservative eyes, the city was "expensive, inefficient and badly run –incapable of responding adequately to the scale of the problems it faced" (Parkinson, 1985: 17). Moreover, since the Tories had been squeezed to the point of extinction in the city, they could easily countenance the ruin of Liverpool in the same way that they had sought to handle the mining towns (Du Noyer, 2002). Indeed,

the pervasive feeling among local politicians is that Liverpool has no place in the Conservatives' scheme of things, who simply do not care about its people or its problems. In local eyes, Liverpool is redundant, economically and politically, to the Conservatives (Parkinson, 1985: 17).

Yet, the city was highly dependent upon central government support due to the structural deficiencies of its rate base, the failure of the Liberals to raise council rates and reserves, and the hopeless over-valuation of the authority's fiscal capacity since the revaluation of 1973

(Parkinson, 1985). Once protected from its own structural decline by high levels of public expenditure, economic failure shifted to fiscal crisis (Parkinson, 1988). Facing crippling pressures, the City Council had shed 4,000 jobs by 1983 and, in the only budget Labour passed during the coalition decade (1980-1), the imposition of a 50 per cent rate increase contributed to a complete reversal of the party's protracted revival since the nadir of 1973 (Carmichael, 1993). In 1983, Labour won a surprising majority which contrasted with the party's decline nationally; its 46 per cent share of the vote was the highest in local history (Mackintosh and Wainwright, 1987). This figure was attributable to Militant's efforts to radicalise the council's workforce, as well as popular resentment towards both local and national government policies; Militant assumed the 'authentic' voice of the Liverpool working class through decades of building on the left (Frost and North, 2013; Marren, 2016). The Labour council, inspired by Militant's Trotskyism,<sup>10</sup> proposed unashamedly "radical socialist solutions to old problems" (Mannin, 1987: 163) and, remembering 1981, refused to dishonour the pre-election manifesto and thus called for "no cuts in jobs and services, no rent or rate increases to compensate for Tory cuts" (Carmichael, 1993: 395). In so doing, it argued that it was 'better to break the law than break the poor' (Parkinson, 1985; Taaffe and Mulhearn, 1988).

Labour contended that Liverpool's problems could only be resolved at the scale of post-war reconstruction (North, 2017), and sought the restoration of £270 million from Whitehall in order to achieve it (Taaffe and Mulhearn, 1988: 101). In this, Liverpool acted alongside other radical left councils at the time (such as Sheffield, the Greater London Council and Lambeth) in opposing rate-capping, but Liverpool remained the most resolute, and certainly had a different complexion (Lansley *et al.*, 1989). Whilst other socialist local authorities experimented with radical, innovative forms of service delivery and participatory forms of governance (Boddy and Fudge, 1984; Mackintosh and Wainwright, 1987), Liverpool was profoundly committed to municipalism. The council's Urban Regeneration Strategy thus focused upon building extensive council housing and clearing slum tenements in order to address the city's dire housing stock (Lees, 2011) (see *Figure 2.2*), which had for decades been a major political battleground.<sup>11</sup> During Labour's term of office (1983-87), over 5,000 new

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<sup>10</sup> Caution should be exercised when analysing Militant's role. The council of 1983-87 was a *Labour*, not *Militant*, council. Of the council's 51 Labour members, only ten to sixteen were Militant-affiliated (Marren, 2016). Liverpool's left-wing networks stretched beyond Militant; indeed, the Communist Party held influential positions in several unions (Frost and North, 2013). This popular misrepresentation, of a Militant-controlled council, was mobilised by the Liberals and Conservatives, and propagated by the media, in order to discredit the campaign (Lowes, 2012; Taaffe and Mulhearn, 1988). However, critics argue that Militant did effectively exert control through clandestine operations and tight unity within their caucus (Crick, 1984).

<sup>11</sup> Labour Councillor and Militant critic Jane Corbett argues that the housing situation was so dire that it "was a gift for Militant", where suicides in high-rise tower blocks were a regular occurrence (interview). Militant and DLP secretary Felicity Dowling described how religious segregation persisted

homes were built alongside parks, hospitals and schools, boosting the public sector as well as private construction employment (Taaffe and Mulhearn, 1988). More broadly, Militant argued for a socialist society and advocated nationalisation of the major industries, a 35-hour working week with no loss in pay, and massive house-building and public works projects, alongside appeals to equality regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation, and more revolutionary proposals including abolishing the monarchy (Marren, 2016).



**Figure 2.2:** Destruction of Sir Thomas White Gardens, 1984-5 (Source: Sinclair, 2014).

In February 1984,<sup>12</sup> councillors met Patrick Jenkin, the then Secretary of State for the Environment. He flatly refused to consider extra concessions for Liverpool; the city would have to follow the rules (Frost and North, 2013). Liverpool Labour was also becoming increasingly estranged from the national party, as leader Neil Kinnock had advocated a 'dented shield' strategy whereby Labour councils should do their best to defend local services, albeit within a compliant legal budget (Mannin, 1987). According to Labour 'modernisers', the party needed to present a 'legitimate' opposition and appear as a credible party of government; to do so, it needed to conform to parliamentary democracy (Lavalette and Mooney, 2000). In March 1984, an illegal budget (where expenditures were declared higher than income) was put to the vote: 25,000 workers demonstrated in Castle Street to support the budget, but the

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up until this point. Sir Thomas White Gardens (known locally as Tommy White's) was a Protestant enclave; returning Tory and Liberal councillors; the Labour Party were not welcome there (interview).

<sup>12</sup> A fuller analysis of Liverpool City Council's plight is beyond the remit of this chapter, and readers are advised to consult Frost and North (2013), Marren (2016) and Parkinson (1985, 1988). For Militant accounts, see *Liverpool: The City that Dared to Fight* (Taaffe and Mulhearn, 1988) and *Inside Left* (Hatton, 1988). For its critics, read *Militant* (Crick, 1984) or *Left Behind* (Kilfoyle, 2000). Herein, their positionality must be borne in mind.

Liberals and Tories, accompanied by six Labour rebels, rejected it (Parkinson, 1985). The Militant campaign made extensive use of propaganda; 210,000 leaflets and 180,000 copies of *Not the Echo*<sup>13</sup> were delivered to factory gates, and a series of marches and public meetings took place (Taaffe and Mulhearn, 1988).

The Conservative Government, whilst concurrently embroiled in the year-long miners' strike, was buying time, and taking precipitate high-profile action, such as sending in commissioners, was considered too risky given the mass workforce support for the council (Mackintosh and Wainwright, 1987). The Tories therefore hoped that voters would tire of the intransigent council come election day; yet, in May 1984, turnout increased to 51 per cent, with Labour boosting its previously precarious majority and, with it, the opportunity to impose the illegal budget. The veto of the 'Sensible' or 'Scabby' Six rebels – the former according to the media and the latter a label of the left – was overturned, and while support for setting an illegal budget was not necessarily overwhelming, support for a united stand against the government certainly was (Mackintosh and Wainwright, 1987). Following a visit to the city, in which Jenkin fatefully declared "I have seen families living in conditions the like I have never seen before [...] they are very grim indeed" (cited in Frost and North, 2013: 81), the council reached a settlement worth £20 million of concessions. Some academics have suggested that Labour councillors – who claimed victory – could have accepted the concessions more magnanimously, and with it the opportunity to seek cooperation with Jenkin (Carmichael, 1993; Gyford, 1985), but this would have been inconsistent with Militant's strategy. While some Labour councillors just wanted to ameliorate the conditions of the working class, Militant saw the dispute as an opportunity for heightening the revolutionary consciousness of Liverpool's working class (Taaffe and Mulhearn, 1988). Accordingly, making threats to bankrupt the city would force the government to surrender, thereby positioning Militant as solid class fighters; alternatively, the city would be bankrupted, thus truly exposing the crisis of capitalism (Parkinson, 1988). Conversely, if the Tories disbanded the council and sent in commissioners, then it would have had the burden of administering a city on the brink of revolt (Marren, 2016).

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<sup>13</sup> Militant activists accused the *Liverpool Echo* of hostility; in response, they produced *Not the Echo* (Frost and North, 2013).

For the 1985 settlement, Liverpool again adopted a position of confrontation in setting an illegal budget, and a 20,000 strong demonstration supported it (see *Figure 2.3*). Jenkin accused Liverpool of 'municipal Stalinism' and proposed that, without cooperation, Liverpool could no longer be supported; "There comes a time when people say 'Look, why are you wasting your time and our money on an unappreciative part of the country?'" (cited in Parkinson, 1985: 126). However, Militant's popularity was starting to wane; service delivery had declined, and local authority trade unions complained about increased workload (Marren, 2016). The long dispute reached its finale when, in June 1985, the District Auditor ordered the council to cut spending, set a new rate level, or sack its 30,000 employees (Taaffe and Mulhearn, 1988). A further request to borrow £25 million from central government was refused and, without the requisite funding, the council was forced to hand ninety-day redundancy notices to its 30,000 employees, which the leadership hoped would rally the workforce into an all-out strike against Westminster (Marren, 2016). However, the unions "failed abysmally to unite in strike action" due to waning support from the white-collar unions (Mannin, 1987: 165). Some council workers began to feel like political pawns, a "manipulated stage army, rather than comrades engaged in shared struggle" (Frost and North, 2013: 120), while even Taaffe and Mulhearn (1988: 281) concede that this was a "major tactical error". In September, the District Auditor began surcharging the councillors and disbarred them for five years, a decision the councillors would appeal for the next two years (Mannin, 1987). In November 1985, the Liverpool Labour Party was suspended, and Kinnock warned that anyone associated with Militant would be expelled (Frost and North, 2013).



**Figure 2.3:** Demonstration in support of the Labour council, 1985 (Source: Sinclair, 2014).



There is a broad consensus within appraisals of the council that Liverpool reacted differently from elsewhere in the mid-1980s, embracing a radical Trotskyist municipalism that was somewhat of an aberration from the city's political history. Taaffe and Mulhearn (1988: 98) allege that the campaign "was unique in its involvement of working-class organisations and its arousal of mass participation" and that its strengths lay in its working-class roots, whereas critic Kilfoyle (2000: 115) infers that Thatcherism merely "spawned desperation, and desperate people seek desperate solutions"; the internal "self-destruction" of the Labour Party, coupled with the simplistic political analysis and sound bite solutions, appealed to the "young, idealistic and naïve" (Kilfoyle, 2000: 39). Incumbent Labour councillor Steve Munby – former Communist Party member and left-wing opponent of Militant – saw "a touch of the Nuremburg Rally" in Militant's mobilisations (quoted in Frost and North, 2013: 78), although Labour did manage to turn the abstraction of socialism into houses and services, and even older right-wing Labour members admitted that they would have found Militant attractive if they had been unemployed teenagers (Crick, 1984). Critics suggest that support for Militant remained based upon ephemeral moods rather than a revolutionary consciousness; people wanted jobs and services, and the socialist agenda failed to translate. Indeed, one voter proclaimed: "I can't stand the Militant. But at least someone is standing up to the Bitch in London" (quoted in Parkinson, 1985: 67). Yet, support for Labour was strong in local elections, with historically high turnouts, whilst in opinion polls 86 per cent responded that the government did not care about the city (Taaffe and Mulhearn, 1988).

Much of the criticism of Militant has focused on the lack of democratisation, where many of the council's practices were regarded as archaic, and left it estranged from the priorities of other left councils at the time (Mackintosh and Wainwright, 1987). More grounded in ideology and symbolism than in *realpolitik* (Kantor *et al.*, 1997), Militant's preoccupation with retaining its pre-election pledge was certainly understandable within the context of the city's blighted political history and the prevailing cynicism directed towards the local political establishment, but their rule was too often undemocratic, paternalistic and chauvinistic, with an emphasis on "explaining", "raising morale" and "attracting new support" to an already identified party line (Gyford, 1985: 92). Working-class concerns which were oppositional were defined as a 'false consciousness', because Militant thought it had already correctly identified the needs of the working class (Lansley *et al.*, 1989). Hence, while the council did attempt to mobilise communities with meetings and rallies, this was more about building consensus from the top down than genuinely encouraging democratic debate, or 'mobilisation without participation' (Lansley *et al.*, 1989; Mackintosh and Wainwright, 1987). Policies were decided through the District Labour Party (DLP) rather than in dialogue with those heterogeneous groups (unions, tenants' associations, women's groups) that had initially sympathised with the council. This



brought them into unnecessary conflict with the local community, and their dogmatic approach to municipalism alienated community groups such as the Eldonians (Thompson, 2015).

Kilfoyle (2000) also lambasts Militant's aggressive, confrontational nature in deterring the private sector from the city, although this was arguably a symptom rather than a cause (Frost and North, 2013), while construction programmes encouraged the private sector to the city (Taaffe and Mulhearn, 1988). Debate has raged over the extent to which Militant's style and practices reflected the peculiarities of Liverpoolian politics historically, with less sympathetic voices accusing Militant of using the politics of patronage, corruption, violence and bossism that plagued the Braddock era (Kilfoyle, 2000). This included secret caucusing, the 'packing' of meetings, cronyism, 'jobs for the boys', bullying and intimidation, but such practices were perhaps more a continuation of longstanding traditions in the city's municipal politics, as well as social practices, such as access to jobs being dependent upon kin networks, than representative of any far-left conspiracy (Frost and North, 2013; Lane, 1987). On charges on intimidation, it was said that the distinct scouse accent marked out the 'authentic' "Liverpool working-class stock" (Kilfoyle, 2000: 215). In turn, it was suggested that their views were privileged over those of the middle class and those from outside the city, to the extent that out-of-town Militant supporters would bizarrely affect a scouse accent in order to gain credibility (Kilfoyle, 2000). The vandalism of greenhouses and subsequent demotion of the 'Harthill Six' gardeners to menial tasks was claimed to be a reprisal for their refusal to join picket lines (Frost and North, 2013). Whatever the interpretation, observers agree that Militant was workerist in outlook, bore an exaggerated rhetoric as well as intellectual poverty (Parkinson, 1985) and appealed on 'bread-and-butter' issues; indeed, this tone proved successful as a means to build support for Militant within party circles, from the city's unions to the unemployed (Kantor *et al.*, 1997). Moreover, Derek Hatton argues that working-class scousers were bound to approach politics differently from those in the Greater London Council (GLC)<sup>14</sup> and that such comparisons were unfair, while councillors were also forced to take a hard line in a city plagued with gangsterism (Hatton, 1988).

Frost and North (2013) also capture the situatedness of Militant's commitment to class reductionism, suspicion of intellectuals and eschewal of student politics (see also Crick, 1984). Lansley *et al.* (1989) assert that Militant's privileging of the manual trade unions as the authentic voice of the working class had more in common with old, right-wing Labour parties than the 'rainbow coalitions' of the New Left, whose embrace of identity politics Militant regarded as mere "lifestyle politics" (Gyford, 1985: 51). In fact, Militant had a number of blind

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<sup>14</sup> The GLC was at the forefront of the 'New Left', which regarded local authorities as authoritarian, bureaucratic, paternalistic and inflexible, and was committed to decentralisation and innovation in the provision of local services (Lansley *et al.*, 1989).

spots on racism, sexism and other forms of identity politics which it viewed as subordinate to the class struggle, issues which would be naturally eroded under socialism (Crick, 1984). As Hatton (1988: xiv) dismissed: “we are not the loony left – more concerned about black mayors and gay rights than we were about building new homes”. This again brought them into conflict with the local community (Meegan, 1989); examples include the appointment of Militant-supporter Sam Bond to Principal Race Relations Advisor and the continued dismissal of positive discrimination policies (see Frost and North, 2013). Workerism also caused Militant to miss opportunities to affiliate with other groups, such as those seeking to fight racism at the time (Frost and North, 2013: 130). This was deeply problematic in a city where racism had become endemic and institutionalised (Frost, 1995), with the council itself historically having a poor record in employing black Liverpoolians (Frost and North, 2013), although Militant insist that majority black areas, such as Toxteth, did receive extra funding (Taaffe and Mulhearn, 1988). Mackintosh and Wainwright (1987) conclude that Liverpool’s politics in the mid-1980s were overwhelmingly representative of the ‘old’ left rather than developing in tandem with the New Left that was emerging in other British cities. Nonetheless, some observers maintain that, despite representing an aberration to Liverpool’s overall political development, Militant gained a degree of legitimacy in representing Liverpool’s working-class community owing to the unique circumstances in which the city found itself, and amid a growing appetite for social change (Frost and North, 2013; Marren, 2016). In turn, Lane (1987) concludes that the rise of Militant owed more to the peculiarities of Liverpool’s place-based politics than it does to the revolutionary politics of Militant itself.

## **2.7 Moving On: Legacies into the ‘90s**

If the 1970s represented the first cries of pain, or in Holloway’s terms (2010) ‘shouts against’ the crisis of capitalism, and if Liverpool became, in the 1980s, the city of missed opportunities (Parkinson and Bianchini, 1993), the 1990s was supposed to herald a new era for the city. Parkinson (1990) argues that Liverpool’s problem was one of leadership; the city had failed to construct a stable coalition to promote regeneration, and its strained relationship with central government led to regime instability (see also Kantor *et al.*, 1997). Neighbouring Manchester was concurrently the frontrunner in the new politics of ‘competitive localism’, where a reluctant acceptance of ‘trickle down’ economics and embracing a ‘new politics’ discourse portrayed as common-sense and apolitical allowed the City Council to negotiate more favourable terms with central government and the private sector, winning grants and direct investment in the process (Cochrane *et al.*, 1996). This ‘urban entrepreneurialism’ (Harvey, 1989) – defined by cooperation rather than confrontation (Frost and North, 2013) – was what the Liberals had previously advocated for Liverpool, and they emerged strongly during this decade, taking control of Liverpool City Council in 1998. In contrast, Munby (2015) argues

that Militant's approach was dogmatic, unimaginative, centralised and hostile to both voluntary and community sectors. The dismissal of the 49 Labour councillors in 1985 marked the decline of the left in Liverpool, and heralded a new era defined by a rightwards turn locally (Lavalette and Mooney, 2000).

The following decade of mostly Labour rule within the City Council was heavily conditioned by the hangover of the 1980s, to the effect of two Labour parties, 'Official Labour' and 'Liverpool Labour', with 43 and 25 of the total 99 seats respectively (Meegan, 2003). Socialists challenged (New) Labour candidates in local elections under a variety of banners including Socialist, Socialist Labour, Socialist Alliance, Ward Labour, Official New Labour, Militant Labour, Broad Left Labour, and other local independent socialist platforms. Moreover, and despite enjoying an increased majority, the party was riven with internal splits over poll-tax (non-) payment, budget setting and staffing cuts; in July 1990, 14 Liverpool councillors were suspended for voting against rent increases, as the prospects for Militant re-organising took a blow. In 1991, Militant debated its 'open turn', eventually leaving Labour to become an independent political party (the Socialist Party). In the same year, in the Walton by-election, Labour Party organiser Peter Kilfoyle – who had been tasked with expelling Militant influence in Liverpool – was challenged by former Militant, Lesley Mahmood, standing for 'Walton Real Labour'. Mahmood lost the by-election heavily but it was her narrow loss of the nomination to be the Labour candidate for that ward that signalled the shift in momentum in the city. The 1990s became characterised by a period of relative political inertia, the left isolated and vulnerable, its majority compromised by a voting coalition of right-wing Labour councillors and the Liberal Democrats (Meegan, 2003).

The 1990s once again illustrated the tenacity of Liverpool's working class, yet it also underlined the waning power of the labour movement and perhaps bookmarked the last manifestation of working-class militancy in the city. Militant bowed out in the Anti-Poll Tax Federation – which was instrumental in forcing out Thatcher nationally (Lavalette and Mooney, 2000) – but locally the dock strike of 1995-98 is notable. In September 1995, 500 dockers were sacked after they refused to cross a picket line put together by striking employers of Torside Ltd, a strike which many felt was engineered in order to assert greater managerial control (Castree, 2000; Marren, 2016). The dockers' strategy was innovative, led from the bottom-up and internationalised in scope, inspiring solidarity actions around the world, as well as gaining support from the community back home; the Women of the Waterfront was a committee constituted of women supporting the strikers, whose remit was fundraising, picketing and organising all aspects of the struggle (Marren, 2016). These women mainly originated from the dockland community, and their collective memory of struggle under casualism prompted them to take active roles during the dispute (Marren, 2016). Critically,

while the dockers ultimately failed to realise their original demands, a number of them invested their redundancy payments into a dilapidated nightclub near to the city centre; the Casa serves as a viable commercial enterprise as well as a hub for left politics in Liverpool today. The strike also exemplified the remaining passion for working-class solidarity and class-consciousness amongst Liverpudlians, as one docker explained:

Growing up working-class in Liverpool means you're taught two things in life: always help your friends and neighbours in need, and never cross a picket line (quoted in Marren, 2016: 229).

The 1990s were a harsh decade for Liverpool, however. The legacies of the 1970s and 80s had left an indelible stain on the city's reputation, whose prominence in national political discourse continued to be characterised by severe unemployment, as well as social decay and crime. To this day, rival football supporters still chant 'sign on, sign on, 'cos you'll never get a job',<sup>15</sup> alluding to Merseyside's recurring unemployment problems (Boland, 2008). Moreover, a number of events drawing national and even international coverage further contributed to defining the reputation of scousers. First, the Heysel Stadium tragedy saw the death of 39 Juventus supporters when a wall collapsed after being charged by Liverpool fans; the match was viewed by millions of people across Europe and beyond, and the tragedy led to English clubs being banned from European competitions for five years (Boland, 2008); Liverpool was tarred as "feral, Neanderthal and barbaric" (Frost and North, 2013: 104). In 1989, the spurious media claims made against Liverpool Football Club (FC) fans following the Hillsborough Disaster (that supporters had caused the disaster by forcing open an exit gate; that they had stolen money from, and urinated on, the dead; and that they had attacked police officers who were resuscitating sufferers) only occurred because of the audiences' predisposition to scousers being framed as drunken, loutish hooligans (Boland, 2008; Scraton, 1999).

Liverpool's setbacks continued: in 1993, two ten-year-old boys abducted and brutally murdered toddler James Bulger, in a crime that shocked the nation. In July 2005, black teenager Anthony Walker was attacked and killed in an unprovoked racist attack, leading the *Liverpool Echo* to lead with the headline "Shame On Our City" (*Liverpool Echo*, 2005). The same year, youngster Michael Shields was at the centre of a fight for justice when he was convicted of attempting to murder a local barman in Bulgaria after travelling to attend the UEFA Champions League Final in which Liverpool FC was competing. Shields proclaimed his innocence, and another scouser duly admitted to the crime before retracting his confession. Finally, in 2007, the city once again hit the national headlines in shame following the killing of 11-year-old Rhys Jones, an innocent victim caught in gangland crossfire. Seemingly

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<sup>15</sup> This chant reworks the lyrics to fit the famous anthem associated with Liverpool FC, *You'll Never Walk Alone*.

anecdotal, these events combined to perpetuate deep-seated national prejudices which have suffocated the city, and allowed Liverpool to be constructed in the national consciousness as “self-indulgent, self-pitying and mawkish” (Belchem, 2006a: 62). In response, Liverpudlians have appropriated their stereotypical image in an expression of localised patriotism (Boland, 2008); as the Liverpool FC terrace chant goes “We’re not English, we are scouse”.

Yet, while the city’s joblessness problems are caricatured, the long-term effects of structural unemployment did take hold and, consequently, whilst the 1990s were a relatively quiet period in the national political landscape for the city, Liverpool’s problems continued. The city has been haunted by the long-term decline of communities as well as profound psychological effects on individuals, including clinical depression, a lack of self-respect, and a sense of despair and gloom (Marren, 2016). The character of Yosser Hughes in the popular TV drama set in the city, *Boys from the Blackstuff* [1982], encapsulates this; the character appears mentally disturbed and emasculated by his inability to provide for his children (Boland, 2008), but the effects of longer-term unemployment within the city have also resulted in the breakdown of relationships, alcohol and illicit drug abuse, increased criminality, and an increase in suicides. Marren furthers that “even the most battle-hardened [of] Liverpool’s closest-knit working-class communities” have failed to cope with such transformations (Marren, 2016: 49). Finally, while statistically Liverpool performs no worse than most other core cities in the UK, it is the *perception* and *fear* of criminality that has most damaged the city. During the mid-1990s, following a spate of gangland killings, it became the first city in England to witness openly armed police officers patrolling the streets, an incident national media reports suggested was instrumental in deterring foreign direct investment from the city (Boland, 2008).

## 2.8 Liverpool ’08: Signs of Renaissance?

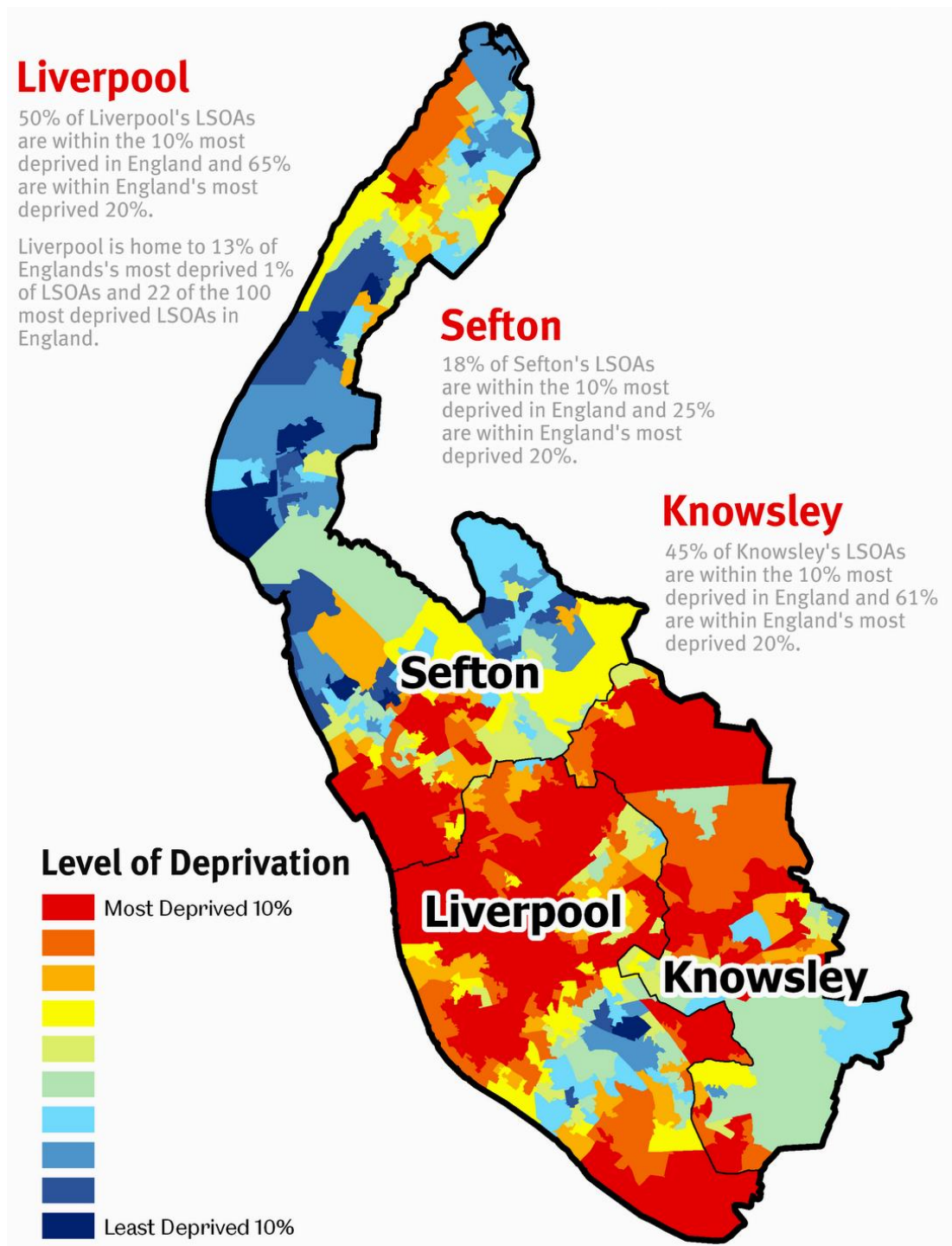
The 2000s saw a period of tentative recovery for the council under the leadership of a new Liberal Democrat (1998-2010) administration defined by pragmatism (Frost and North, 2013). In addition, Liverpool “demonstrated once again its exceptional local politics” (Meegan, 2003: 65) by reversing the 1997 national swing towards New Labour. The new council was increasingly proactive in “promoting partnership working, civic boosterism and entrepreneurship, and driving forward the city’s regeneration” (Sykes *et al.*, 2013: 13), supported by national and supra-national monies. The early 1990s had seen the city secure substantial regeneration funds from central government to fund the physical revitalisation of inner-city areas (Couch, 2003) but, more saliently, the council won significant EU funding (1993) from the *Objective One* fund, which allocated over £1.3 billion to the city for regeneration (Sykes *et al.*, 2013). Regeneration was underpinned by an emphasis on

community leadership, capacity building and social capital, terms permeating Blairite policy discourse; one of the 'key drivers for change' was to be the people of Merseyside themselves (Wilks-Heeg, 2003b). The experience was mixed; in Knowsley, local people lacked the resources to be significant players in such partnerships, and were sceptical of the latest regeneration attempt to hit town (Boland, 1999). Others reflect more positively that, whilst the first tranche (1994-1999) of Objective One money was hampered by local politics and proved geographically uneven, the next (2000-2006) focused at the regional, rather than neighbourhood level, performed better. This was in relation to developing the city's four strategic objectives as defined by the (since 2010) Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP); the cultural economy, the knowledge economy, the port of Liverpool, and the low carbon economy (see North, 2017). This period also saw the proliferation of the social economy and voluntary sector on Merseyside, with such organisations working hard with the council and other local actors to alleviate poverty at a local level (North, 2017; Taylor, 2011).

Since the mid-2000s, the city has worked hard to reverse many of its negative perceptions (Garcia, 2006), pursuing an aggressive place-marketing approach (Boland, 2008). In 1999 *Liverpool Vision* was founded; as the UK's first Urban Regeneration Company (URC), it assumed responsibility for the redevelopment of the city centre (Meegan, 2003). With monetary support from the EU, the cityscape was transformed; the Echo Arena and BT Convention Centre complemented the previous renovation of Albert Dock, and the £500 million Liverpool ONE shopping mall (albeit privately sponsored) has stimulated a vibrant visitor economy (North, 2017). This has occurred hand-in-hand with Liverpool's cultural revival, with the 2008 *European Capital of Culture* success helping to reimagine the city nationally and internationally (Garcia *et al.*, 2010), while cementing its reputation as a city 'on the up'. Yet, while Liverpool remains the chief architect of culture-driven, urban entrepreneurialist strategies in the UK – exemplified by the 2008 strapline, 'the world in one city' – Liverpool is one of the least ethnically diverse of all British cities given the relatively small numbers of post-war Commonwealth migrants, leading Belchem (2006a: xxvii) to question whether the city "has a sufficiently cosmopolitan and bohemian complexion" to attract the assumed drivers of economic growth in the post-industrial city, what Florida (2002) terms the 'creative classes'.

Moreover, others have critiqued the ability of cultural events to overturn or ameliorate entrenched social problems, and the city remains the most deprived in the UK; 70 per cent of its 33 electoral wards are within the 10 per cent most deprived in England and Wales (Sykes *et al.*, 2013) (see *Figure 2.4*). Furthermore, geographic inequalities actually increased during this period, with particularly acute deprivation faced in the city's northern and peripheral districts (Boland, 2008). Facelift aside, many of the city's long-standing problems remain,

including unemployment, poor labour skills and productivity, and an underdeveloped business infrastructure (North, 2017; Parkinson *et al.*, 2016). 'Regeneration' has become the city's "dominant, if seldom quantified or questioned, objective" (Sykes *et al.*, 2013: 2), within an entrepreneurial model critiqued for exacerbating inequalities and reproducing privilege for elite sections of the population (Jones and Wilks-Heeg, 2004). In this context, the city-centre population has exploded fourfold since 1990, with a focus on attracting young managerial and professional workers (Meegan, 2003). However, others also cite the tendency for 'place-less' development in this paradigm; evidenced, for example, in the reconstruction of the Albert Dock, which initially ignored Liverpool's slave trade history to the exclusion of the local black population (Harvey, 2012). Such initiatives also continue to subjectify and transfer responsibility to local populations; the proposed £5.5 billion waterfront development *Liverpool Waters* (Figure 2.5) has cited the opportunity to "help tackle Liverpool's enterprise deficit, inspiring and motivating young people and those already in the labour market" (quoted in Jones, 2015: 474), articulating a social pathology discourse reminiscent of those earlier policy interventions into the city.



**Figure 2.4:** English Indices of Deprivation, 2010: Liverpool, Sefton, and Knowsley (After: Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010).





**Figure 2.5:** Proposed Model of Liverpool Waters (Source: *Liverpool Echo*, 2017a).

The 2010, 2015 and 2017 majority-Conservative or coalition governments mark a continuation of entrepreneurial approaches albeit defined by 'localism'. In parallel, since 2010, Labour has returned to the Town Hall and advocated a policy of cooperation, rather than confrontation, with central government (Frost and North, 2013). Most pointedly, while Liverpool has enjoyed economic revival, this has been almost wholly depended upon significant national and EU funding, and 76 per cent of the council's income is provided by government grants (Liverpool City Council, 2014a). Furthermore, while Liverpool's growth has been allied with a welcome return of the private sector (Sykes *et al.*, 2013), this model highly exposes the city to the vagaries of global capitalism (Jones, 2015), while the benefits (or costs) of regional devolution to the Liverpool City Region (Nurse, 2015), and the opportunities and threats posed by Brexit (North, 2017), are yet to be fully realised.

Following Liverpool's economic progress, the failure of Trotskyist municipal politics and the decline of the local labour movement, it has been argued that the city has become overwhelmed by apathy, and its radical nature confined to history. The Liverpool Riverside constituency had experienced the lowest voter turnout for both the 2005 and 2010 General Elections, while this pattern has been mirrored in local elections also (BBC News, 2016). However, this is arguably explained by disillusionment with New Labour, which prompted activists to reject the ballot box and instead pursue neighbourhood-based politics typically directed towards local 'top-down' provision (for struggles over urban clearances, see Taylor, 2011). Indeed, there is a prevailing feeling in some neighbourhoods that the council is engaged in a deliberate programme of 'managed decline' (Thompson, 2015). To this end, Liverpool is home to a

plethora of “characteristically Liverpoolian” grassroots groups who bring an “innovative and practical edge to their local pride and to their intensely ‘conservative’ loyalty to place” (Belchem and Biggs, 2011: 9). Moreover, Liverpoolians have continued to struggle for their own destiny in ways resonant with the city’s twentieth-century politics, exemplifying a steadfast refusal to accept the power interests of elites, characterised by a cynical mistrust of external authorities and grand plans which have too often failed to be accompanied by their proclaimed transformative benefits (Jones, 2015; Taylor, 2011).

This cynicism could yet prove debilitating, as one of the defining features of Liverpool’s early twenty-first century political backdrop is the tension between the city’s real need for economic and infrastructural investment, versus the perceived scepticism and tendency for self-determination exhibited by local communities, with the latter often exasperating the former (Belchem and Biggs, 2011). Nevertheless, a variety of social justice issues are still being addressed in the city. In 2008, Liverpool FC supporters set up a supporters’ union (*Spirit of Shankly*) to campaign against ownership issues, before moving to support wider campaigns for social justice in (and beyond) the city (Massey, 2010). In 2017, Liverpool FC supporters again showed their propensity for left-wing politics and solidarity by unveiling a banner on the Kop<sup>16</sup> in support of socialist Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, alongside local and national social justice causes, including the Hillsborough Justice Campaign<sup>17</sup> and the Blacklist Support Group<sup>18</sup> (see *Figure 2.6*). Labour activist, Roy Benthall (of all three campaigns) claimed that support for Corbyn is characteristic of “working-class people in [a] historically working-class city” (*Liverpool Echo*, 2017b). In the 2017 General Election, all five Liverpool constituencies saw Labour landslides combined with increased majorities, in which the lowest, Maria Eagle in Garston and Halewood, still obtained 77.7 per cent of the vote (Liverpool City Council, 2017b).

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<sup>16</sup> The Spion Kop is the internationally-renowned terrace upon which Liverpool FC’s most fanatical supporters reside, and which has played a significant role in shaping fan culture (Williams, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> In the Hillsborough Disaster in 1989, 96 Liverpool FC supporters were crushed to death due to police failures, which were thereafter covered up by the British establishment (Scruton, 2013). The city pursued justice for nearly thirty years before an independent inquest determined a verdict of unlawful killing. The *Sun* newspaper, which publicised the false allegations, is still boycotted by Liverpoolians today. Rather than ‘self-pity’, such responses are actually examples of community spirit (Boland, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> The Blacklist Support Group has a presence in Liverpool. For more information, see Smith and Chamberlain (2015).



**Figure 2.6:** Jeremy Corbyn banner displayed on the Kop, 2017 (Source: *Independent*, 2017).

## 2.9 Conclusions

This chapter has examined the political histories of Liverpool in order to explore the political imaginaries present within the city, and to understand how political identities have been (re)constructed through the ongoing negotiation of power, antagonisms and solidarities (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Seeing the relationships between social movements and place as co-constitutive (Nicholls *et al.*, 2013), this chapter has examined how various protest movements have carved out political agency within the city, and (re)shaped working-class identities accordingly (Featherstone, 2005). Returning to Liverpool exceptionalism, there is no doubt that the city has faced unique challenges, and that it has responded with a full range of movement repertoires, drawing upon a long-established oppositional culture (Marren, 2016). An alternative view is that Liverpool's radicalism is too often romanticised, perhaps even mythologised, and that resistance to Thatcherism was similar, or perhaps even more radical, elsewhere. Liverpool's protest movements also often had conservative underpinnings, and the city's politics were rife with patronage and bossism. Furthermore, others suggest that too little is discussed of Empire. Whether Liverpool is conceivably 'exceptional' is, therefore, debatable; perhaps, even, it is a perpetual myth. Nonetheless, the radicalism of Liverpool – at least in popular imagination – remains present, and a wealth of literature continues to make the case for a Liverpoolian political difference (Frost and North, 2013; Lane, 1987; Lowes, 2012; Marren, 2016; Munck, 2003). Into the 2010s, grassroots movements still prevail in the city (Taylor, 2011), and the culture is still somewhat estranged from British society. This

chapter has also shown that, even when protest movements have failed to deliver their original demands, they leave behind the residues for new struggle, and remain part of a vibrant leftist network within the city. Moreover, Liverpool cannot be understood as simply a passive victim of external forces, but has instead carved its own political agency and unique oppositional identity. Therefore, in 2010, as austerity struck, would Liverpool's exceptional nature again come to the fore? It is from this point that the research departs.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Austerity Politics in the UK: A Critical Review**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter reviews the critical literature in order to situate austerity within its broader historical, geographical and political context, and to position the thesis within its wider conceptual landscape. First, the chapter locates the emergence of austerity politics in the response to the global financial crisis of 2007-8, after which the concept of austerity came to fruition as a credible policy prescription for economic crisis across the developed world. Section 3.2 thereafter examines the political dynamics which allowed austerity to sustain cross-party consensus within the UK. The major contention of this chapter is that, hitherto, austerity has been theorised within multiple analytical frames, which have enriched our understanding of the concept in diverse ways. However, these framings also have their limits. The chapter therefore embarks upon a systematic review of existing austerity research and outlines the potentialities of each conceptual approach. Section 3.3 examines the genealogy of austerity politics and situates recent austerity imposition as part of the broader trajectory of neoliberalism. Section 3.4 explores the literature on the cultural politics of austerity within the UK. This work focuses on the discursive framing of austerity politics, and seeks to explain how neoliberal austerity has procured consent amongst the populace. This entails a closer reading of the political discourses that have been propagated under the paradigm of austerity. Section 3.5 overviews the literature examining the disproportionate impacts of austerity. Finally, section 3.6 examines those responses emanating from the political left in the wake of the crisis, and analyses how these have been theorised within the literature. Drawing on these different frameworks, the chapter concludes that no singular analytical frame is sufficient to account for the diverse set of processes which constitute austerity. Furthermore, recent theorising of the current conjuncture lacks suitable engagement with the diverse forms of actually existing contestation that are taking place, in particular the need to focus on the organic evolution of resistance; how and why does certain resistance appear, and how is it being remade? This chapter highlights lacunae within existing austerity research which compel further examination, and lays the foundations for the ‘more-than-cuts’ framework for understanding anti-austerity resistance, which is introduced later in the thesis. The reader is also informed that, while this chapter presents a general overview, more specific conceptual frameworks are introduced in each of the three subsequent empirical chapters alongside the research findings.

### **3.2 Entering an ‘Age of Austerity’**

As late as mid-2007, the global economic scene was strong; the advanced economies were rid of inflation, the business cycle had finally been expunged, and stable growth had been firmly established (Kitson *et al.*, 2011). This ‘long boom’ had lasted since the early 1990s, and had proved the longest and most stable since the 1960s (Mason, 2009). Yet, this long boom was built upon an unsustainable growth model underpinned by a dramatic rise in household debt and a global financial system which, unleashed from regulation, increasingly made speculative investments. Over this period, consumers could borrow cheaply to sustain their debt-fuelled consumption, and the resulting increase in consumer demand spurred economic growth; unemployment fell and living standards rose (Brown, 2010). However, the capitulation of the US financial markets in late 2007, and the global banking meltdown that followed in 2008, brought an abrupt end to the long boom, and plunged the advanced economies into the “sharpest, deepest, most widespread recession since the 1930s” (Peston, 2012: 133). The crisis has been widely recognised as one of the most severe in the history of world capitalism (Gough, 2011; Harvey, 2010). The UK suffered the repercussions of the collapse of the US sub-prime market and its knock-on effects were prolonged, triggering the first run on a bank since 1866 (Hodson and Mabbett, 2009). By late 2007, the UK Government had unveiled a £37 billion scheme to recapitalise the major banks (Hindmoor and McConnell, 2015). In the autumn of 2008, the UK’s banks faced total collapse without rescue by the state; £1.2 trillion, or 83 per cent of annual economic output, was provided by the taxpayer, although economic contraction continued (Whitfield, 2012). This response marked a temporary period of quasi-Keynesianism led by the incumbent Labour Government (Kickert, 2012). Yet, simultaneously, the public accumulation of private debt, owing to the banking bail-outs, as well as to increased state expenditure and reduced tax receipts as a result of the recession, was quickly becoming reframed into a sovereign debt crisis (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011).

In May 2010, Labour was unseated in favour of the Coalition, which, upon election, immediately diagnosed the crisis as one of reckless fiscal spending; the remedy was austerity. The Coalition promised to take “decisive action” in order to prevent a “catastrophic collapse” in economic confidence, with Chancellor George Osborne placing culpability upon the outgoing Labour Government, stating that “the [previous] years of debt and spending make this unavoidable”, whilst Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, of the Liberal Democrats, warned that the Coalition had “no choice except to clear up the financial mess that Labour left us” (BBC News, 2010). In proposing to rein in excessive public spending, slash the purportedly bloated budgetary deficit and navigate the travails of the global recession, the Coalition imposed an unprecedented wave of austerity policies which, it conceded, were “tough decisions” but were both necessary and unavoidable “in order to reduce the

unprecedented deficit” (HM Treasury, 2010: 6). Consequently, the Coalition pursued the deepest sustained periods of cuts to public spending since World War II (Farnsworth, 2011). While the then Prime Minister David Cameron publicly acknowledged that the austerity programme was likely to cost the Coalition popularity, he argued that it was “the right thing to do – for the health of our economy, for the poorest in our society, for the future of our country” (BBC News, 2010). However, although the Coalition invoked the rhetoric of fairness – promising to “ensure that fairness is at the heart of those decisions” (HM Government, 2010: 7), and not to “allow the poorest people in Britain to pay an unfair price for the mistakes of the richest” (Conservative Party, 2010: 6) – it was public services, public infrastructure and welfare expenditure which each arose as the foremost targets for fiscal retrenchment or withdrawal. For advocates of austerity, cutting public spending spurs business confidence by signalling to investors that the state will neither be ‘crowding out’ the market nor adding to its debt burden, whilst consumers, confidence raised, are encouraged to spend; through state cut-backs, the economy will be nursed back to good health.

In the UK, austerity politics were thus framed as inevitable, unquestionable and detached from any ideology, instead promoted as a practical and commonsensical series of budgetary logics. This conflation of government and household budgets promulgated the core premise of austerity; that a state, just like an individual, cannot spend more than it has, and that debt cannot be cured with more debt, and this narrative gained intuitive and popular appeal in the wake of the crisis. YouGov (2015) data indicate that a majority of voters believed that austerity was necessary, a figure that remained relatively stable between 2010 and 2015. Furthermore, voters blamed Labour rather than the Coalition; in June 2010, 48 per cent of those polled attributed responsibility to Labour, while the Tories had escaped culpability even five years later (YouGov, 2015). At the national level, consent for austerity was procured through a series of recurrent tropes which expressed collective pain-sharing, and euphemisms which stressed politicians’ emotional anguish at enacting spending cuts (Seymour, 2016). Clarke and Newman (2012) have described this paradoxical position as ‘virtuous necessity’, which makes simultaneous claims that austerity is necessary, and that its adoption by the Coalition represents an act of political virtue, where tough, unpopular decisions must be taken to rebuild a broken economy: “because unless we do, our children will be saddled with debt for years to come” (Cameron, 2010b: n.p.). Chancellor George Osborne (2010: n.p.) went further; invoking images of austerity-blighted Greece, he argued “[this] is what happens when governments lack the willingness to act decisively and quickly, and when the problems are swept under the carpet”. The virtuous necessity was exemplified by the Coalition tagline ‘we are all in this together’, which sought to obfuscate the various power dynamics associated with austerity politics (see 3.3). Challenges to the debt narrative were also questioned in decidedly



moral terms; Labour Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls was publicly labelled a ‘deficit denier’ by the Conservatives, while the quotation from David Cameron, above, illustrates how ‘we’ have a generational responsibility to pay off the public debt.

However, it is pertinent to consider that although the Coalition defined itself according to the necessity to tackle public debt, it was far less concerned about rising private debt, which had soared under the politics of austerity (Taylor-Gooby, 2012). Critical scholarship has also noted how, despite a high budget deficit, Britain does not typically have a high level of public debt (50-60 per cent of GDP), and is reasonably well financed through relatively cheap, long-term loans (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011). Politically, the Conservatives had also broadly supported Labour’s spending plans in the lead-up to the crisis. This followed New Labour’s easing of regulation in the finance industry, as part of a new ‘municipal pragmatism’ which provided high tax receipts to the treasury (Ganesh, 2012). Finally, in office, the Coalition consistency failed to meet its own stated ambitions for fiscal reduction (Lee and Beech, 2015). Despite this, the narrative that “the country has overspent; it has not been under-taxed” (Osborne, 2010) enjoyed popular acquiescence throughout the period of Coalition rule (2010-2015), as did the perspective that the fiscally reckless Labour Party was responsible for it. Yet, critical scholarly literature has situated austerity politics within their broader historical and political trajectories in an attempt to draw out a fuller analysis of what austerity represents, and how it has acquired popular consent. Having emplaced austerity within the recent UK political context, it is to this research that the chapter now turns.

### **3.3 The Genealogy of Austerity Politics**

This section charts the genealogy of austerity politics and locates recent austerity imposition as part of the broader trajectory of neoliberalism. This conceptual lens has served as the dominant framework, within the scholarly literature, for analysing political transformation in the current conjuncture. Section 3.3.1 traces the early origins of austerity discourse, while 3.3.2 examines the relationship between austerity and the modern state. Finally, 3.3.3 considers what this research means for contemporary political developments.

#### *3.3.1 Austerity, Debt and the State: Early Origins*

Research into the lineage of austerity has traced its roots in the society from which its name derives, Ancient Greece, and the associated no-growth, zero-sum economies which stressed abstinence and warned against the excesses of consumption (Schui, 2014). Others have observed that, in many societies, debt is often morally and linguistically conflated with sin, which also has its roots in religion, and restraint was therefore celebrated as a moral virtue (Maher, 2014). Anthropologist David Graeber’s highly influential text, *Debt: The First 5,000*



*Years* (2011), also insists upon the historical importance of debt for exchange, in ways which dispel the assertion of classical economics that human primordial societies developed from an innate propensity to ‘truck and barter’ (Smith [1776], 1982). Instead, Graeber locates the emergence of the credit system within primitive economies, where accounts were kept on clay tablets, and landowners lent to peasants on the proviso of repayment. This excursion demonstrates how relationships developed around debt which were both violent and unjust, and where the struggle between rich and poor took the form of conflicts between creditors and debtors, through which moral constructions about the rights and wrongs of interest payments, debt peonage, seizure and amnesty emerged.

Blyth (2013), on the other hand, argues that, for an idea so central to the governance of states and markets, the intellectual history of austerity is relatively shallow. Much less existing as a well-defined theory that can be traced back in time, austerity represents a series of sensibilities, embedded in liberalism, which promotes austerity as the default prescription for when markets fail. Developed within the Age of Enlightenment, a time symbolised by sovereigns and profound wealth inequality, liberal economics grew up hostile to the state, which was something to be avoided, bypassed, and distrusted (Hirschman, 1977). This early liberal view cast the state as an unwanted interference into the ‘natural’ law of the market, which it assumed would flourish once the state was withdrawn from public life. These early economic liberals – from John Locke, to David Hume and Adam Smith – regarded public debt as racked up by, and for, the sovereign, and instead advocated minimalist conceptions of what the exact scope of the state should be. While a deeper reading of the differences between these economic liberals is beyond the remit of this chapter, these early thinkers tended to share a scepticism of the state’s demand for revenue, and argued against monetary stimulus. This hostility resulted from the state’s tendency to accumulate debt rather than raise taxes due to political expediency; the costs of borrowing are therefore hidden, and do not impact until the future (Kaposy *et al.*, 2017). While not drawing explicit arguments for austerity, early liberals began to draw intellectual rationales around already existing moral conceptions of debt, and championed restraining the expenditure of states, sparking a body of theory which, to the present day, continues to argue against sovereign debt accumulation.

However, others recognise that markets are not natural phenomena but are instead socially constructed arenas in which individuals buy and sell under a series of formal and informal rules. To this end, the transition to market-based societies was not inevitable, but depended upon the violent transformation of people into wage labourers, the dispossession of land for the purposes of securing private property, and the invention of capital, which each required the full thrust of the state in order to be achieved (Foucault, 1979; Marx [1887], 1970; Polanyi [1944], 2001). In turn, Karl Marx (1964) proposed that capitalism is characterised by conflict

and instability, and that the economy is a continually evolving process characterised by periodic crisis and adjustment. In capitalism, there is an imperative towards the valorisation and expansion of markets and production, and the constant accumulation of capital. The Marxist perspective thus sees the recurrence of financial bubbles neither as an aberration of the market, as a result of undue state interference within it, nor from the moral deficiencies of individuals. Rather, crisis is perceived as an inherent symptom of the very nature of capitalism itself (Dunn, 2009; Harvey, 2010). In such accounts, the accumulation of debt results from inequalities existing between those who own the means of production, the bourgeoisie, and the proletariat, who are compelled to borrow as a consequence of their wage exploitation.

### *3.3.2 Austerity and the Modern State*

The emergence of nineteenth-century nationalism and state building demanded a much more interventionist state than liberalism had previously anticipated. Consequently, anti-statism began to erode and, in the twentieth century, the British Liberal Party enacted growing calls for social reform within an era of heightened class conflict and incipient mass democracy (Blyth, 2013). If the primacy of markets was to be maintained, then such poverty could no longer be tolerated; liberal pragmatism led to welfare reform which ultimately laid the foundations for the modern welfare state (Hughes and Lewis, 1998). Yet, concurrently, the Austrian School of Economics – its key proponents being Ludwig von Mises, Joseph Schumpeter and Friedrich Hayek – remained wedded to anti-statism, developing an economic Darwinist conception of the market which advocated creative destruction. Rather than see the state prop up failing businesses, a recession must be put to use by purging those unproductive components of the economy. For Schumpeter (1947), capitalism progresses and evolves precisely because of these failures, not despite them. Hayek (1944) emphasised the individual liberty that the free market brought, at the expense of collectivist economies, which he blamed for the rise of totalitarian regimes. This stood in marked contrast to the British Liberals' growing belief that recessions were largely ameliorable through fiscal stimulus. In *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, Keynes (1936) proposed that, during a recession, a lack of investor confidence results in hoarding and, resultantly, reduced consumption; the role of the state is to stimulate demand through spending, thus inducing the multiplier effect. Instead of being a moral virtue, collective saving is a vice leading to the 'paradox of thrift', whereby the entire economy shrinks as a result, and automatic stabilisers simply heighten the burden on the state. For Keynesians, programmes under the direct auspices of government should be undertaken in order to stimulate demand and economic growth; it is 'jobs first, deficits later' (Skidelsky, 2009; Wapshott, 2011).

In the post-war period, the modern British welfare state was created, deeply rooted within Keynesian logic. The Labour Government (1945-51) introduced the National Health Service (NHS), social security, free education for all children and council housing, and also ensured full employment (Lewis, 2004). In Keynesian economics, the welfare state exists as a “powerful counter-cyclical tool, producing deficits during recessionary periods and surpluses during boom times” (Pierson, 1994: 2). The debt attached to increased state spending during recessions is therefore calculated as an investment, rather than a cost. By guaranteeing a floor for economic consumption, Keynesian state-form restructuring can be seen to have emerged in order to protect the capitalist order, and to achieve a ‘class compromise’ which sought to mediate between the interests of capital and labour. In this Fordist regime of accumulation, the compromise was for mass production/consumption, national economic management of aggregate demand, and collective wage deals. There were also controls over capital mobility, and a high degree of state-planning and nationalised industries (Harvey, 2003, 2005).

By the mid-1970s, global capitalism was in disarray. A further capitalist crisis of overaccumulation marked a period of ‘stagflation’ characterised by rising unemployment, accelerating inflation and declining growth. A fiscal crisis ensued as tax revenues plunged and social expenditures soared; by 1975-6, Britain experienced an IMF bailout (Rogers, 2013). The post-war Keynesian consensus was perceived to have collapsed, and a period of paradigmatic crisis ensued during which a new alternative was urgently required to kick-start the process of capitalist accumulation (Harvey, 2007). Initially, leftist responses were to strengthen state regulation but these policies immediately proved to contradict the necessary demands of capital (Harvey, 2003). The Keynesian enterprise had disintegrated to the extent that the Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan, asserted that “[we] used to think that you could spend your way out of a recession and increase employment by cutting taxes and boosting government spending [...] that option no longer exists” (cited in Cassidy, 2009: 79). Thus, neoliberalism emerged as an ideological project within which capital sought to exploit new markets for accumulation through globalisation (the ‘spatial fix’) and exposing previously non-capitalist markets to commodification. For Harvey (2007: 22), neoliberalism concerned “restor[ing] class dominance to sectors that saw their fortunes threatened by the ascent of social-democratic endeavours”. The neoliberal doctrine unleashed capital from its Keynesian constraints and sought to re-establish more fruitful conditions for capitalist accumulation. Ideologically, this doctrine combined the liberal belief in the “moral and economic superiority of competitive [free] markets, price signals, individualism, and consumer choice over state intervention” (Hodkinson and Robbins, 2013: 59), alongside the (neo-)conservative concern over the demise of traditional institutions (the family, church, private property rights) and

values (patriarchy, self-reliance, hard work), which were considered to have been eroded under the social-democratic paradigm.

In the UK, the 1979 General Election victory of the Conservative Party, led by Margaret Thatcher, broadly marks this historical point of rupture with the post-war consensus. In the late 1970s, the welfare state was critiqued from both the 'New Left', which regarded welfare provision as authoritarian, paternalistic and inflexible (Cockburn, 1977; London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1979), and the political right, which posited that the welfare state undermined traditional societal structures, in particular the role(s) of the male breadwinner and the nuclear family (Clarke, 2003). Meanwhile, the neoliberal perspective emphasised individual freedom, responsibility and market provision; state intervention was argued to cause economic mismanagement and ultimately an erosion of individual liberty, as argued by Hayek (1944). In addition, the interfering state unnecessarily burdened the taxpayer, and artificially cushioned social life from the rigours of market relations (Cairncross, 1992). State welfare was seen to have transformed the nation from one of 'do-it-yourself' into one of 'give-it-to-me' (Schmidt, 2001: 257). Moving forward, it would not be the role of the state to compensate for 'natural' differences arising between hardworking and successful people versus those who are unemployed because they are lazy, unattractive to potential employers, and/or ill-suited to existing jobs, rather than due to any structural or spatial tendencies of capitalism (Smith, 1984). For neoliberals, the UK had a state crisis; the solution was a radical, Hayekian political redefinition of state-economy-society relations (MacGregor, 1985). In turn, Thatcherism shared three overarching motives. First, it sought to unite factions of the 'New Right' and restore Conservative political dominance. Secondly, it aimed to replace the Keynesian class compromise. Thirdly, Thatcherism intended to reinstate suitable conditions for profitable capital accumulation through economic restructuring and by punishing trade union power (Gamble, 1988; Levitas, 1986).

### *3.3.3 Emerging Challenges to the Neoliberal Consensus?*

The implications of Thatcherism within the UK are profound, given the hegemonic status of neoliberalism which has occurred ever since. Since the post-war era, welfare provision had been a universal entitlement, but was now interventionist and conditional, marking a return to pre-welfare provision proffered only for the most needy (Pinch, 1997). In this 'workfare' state (Peck, 2001), conditionality requires recipients to earn their benefits through behavioural changes and active participation in state programmes, which seek to shape individuals to meet the requirements of employers (Jordan, 2013; Painter and Jeffrey, 2009). Once in power, the *New Labour* Government (1997-2010) also extended workfarism, and committed to neoliberal ideals of individual economic responsibility and the superiority of markets (Wiggan, 2012).

Unlike the neoliberal counter-revolution of the 1970s, which was able to carve out the intellectual and policy space for supporters of liberalisation to champion anti-state perspectives, the most recent crisis has continued the implementation of neoliberal policy, despite the fact that it has not solved the crisis of accumulation (Aalbers, 2013; Peck, 2010). Thus, in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, British politics remained wedded to the neoliberal notion that ‘there is no alternative’, in which the neoliberal capitalist order was framed as the only credible solution. Austerity politics are not, therefore, a neutral policy prescription by which to restore objective economic prosperity, but are instead a political endeavour which serves as an “alibi for a far-reaching further restructuring of the state and society along market lines, with a raft of ideologically-driven ‘reforms’ [to] advance privatisation and marketisation” (Hall *et al.*, 2013: 5).

To understand further how and why alternative forms of socio-political organisation have not developed to challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism, many scholars have leaned on post-political theory. Post-politics depicts a growing depoliticisation of political issues, and across contemporary society more generally, which has implications for power and resistance. Accordingly, a post-political framing is structured around the perceived inevitability of capitalism and the market economy, forming liberal democracy, as the basic organisational structure of society, for which there is no alternative (Swyngedouw, 2007). Whilst this condition is rooted within classical liberalism (Mouffe, 2005), it reached its apogee during the ‘end of history’ and the subsequent transition to universal liberal democracy (Fukuyama, 1992). For its proponents, the post-political not only denies the possibility for alternative socio-political interpretations, but also consolidates neoliberal ideology by posing market-driven economic rationality as the only legitimate method of societal arrangement (Rancière, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2007, 2009). Here, the post-political does not imply the emergence of a consummate neoliberal project – neoliberalism must instead continually expand its scope by exploiting new markets (Harvey, 2007) – rather, it depicts the praxis through which neoliberalism, as a political project, “attempts to create a social reality that it suggests already exists” (Read, 2009: 30). According to post-political theory, contestation has not vanished but is instead deliberately obfuscated, to the extent that to assume any other position, to engage in ideological contestation, is inherently untenable. In turn, the state is reconceived merely as a “managerial function, deprived of its proper political dimension” (Žižek, 2002: 303). The consequence of post-politics is that although crisis constitutes a moment of urgent, bitterly contested struggle, the post-political condition undermines and foreclose the very spaces in which an alternative may gestate (Haughton *et al.*, 2016).

The different works in this section have allowed the chapter to navigate the lineage of austerity politics, which begins in ancient and primitive societies, and understand how austerity is

inextricably tied to debt, morality, and the remaking of individuals. Through tracing developments in economic liberalism and the subsequent hegemonic fashioning of neoliberalism, the section has suitably located contemporary austerity politics within a broader political trajectory. From this, it can be observed that austerity is deeply entangled with neoliberal conceptions of the nature, role and scope of the modern state, and must be conceptualised as something that operates on a variety of spatial scales, and transcends mere attempts to ‘rebalance the books’. However, while these accounts are useful for examining how austerity politics were arrived at, and were considered to be a credible policy response, in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, these accounts typically underplay the extent to which austerity is a profoundly cultural manifestation, and it is to these perspectives that the chapter now turns.

### 3.4 The Cultural Politics of Neoliberal Austerity

Whilst structuralist scholars and those of regulation theory (Jessop, 2002; Peck and Tickell, 2002) succinctly detail the embeddedness of neoliberalism, the actual process by which it became hegemonic, or common sense, is rather neglected. Given that neoliberalism can be understood as a class project to re-establish capitalist accumulation, it is unclear how and why the working class has failed to respond with coherent resistance and, in many cases, actually consented to the neoliberal project. Read’s analysis of Foucault shows how neoliberalism can be understood as a transformation *in* (rather than *of*) ideology; rather than simply (re)iterated by a dominant class, neoliberalism becomes common sense through presenting ‘reality’, posed as “the entirety of human existence” (Read, 2009: 26). Hence, it is not just a political project, but a fundamentally new understanding of human nature and social existence (Read, 2009). Contra classical liberalism, which naturalised the market and humans’ innate propensity to trade (see Smith [1776], 1982), neoliberalism fundamentally reinterpreted the market not as the point of exchange, but of competition (Foucault, 2008). Rather than perpetuating a *laissez-faire* approach to the market, neoliberal ideology forwarded the state as the active producer and guarantor of markets; the ‘freedom’ exercised by *homo economicus* (the anthropomorphism of the economic subject) was thus fostered by the watchful eye of the state (Lemke, 2001). This shift to *homo economicus* (from the subject of exchange to competition) marks a fundamental rethink of the subjectification of the individual by expanding the rationale of economics towards all aspects of human life; from birth to death, and everything in between (Read, 2009). To this end, neoliberalism constitutes a new ‘mode of governmentality’ in which people are governed yet, paradoxically, also govern themselves in ways which reproduce neoliberal hegemony. Therefore, it is the quotidian reproduction of neoliberalism that crafts an effective strategy of subjectification, as ordinary people are

complicit in (re)creating neoliberalism (Lemke, 2001). Neoliberalisation, therefore, entails a cultural reformation.

The writings of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci are also pertinent here. Across Gramsci's writings lay micro-studies of practices within Italian society that contribute to the fashioning of hegemony and common sense; through these, he posits that a spontaneous rejection of the philosophies of the ruling classes is complicated by the organic ties that bind the popular masses to them. In this conception of political transformation, it is necessary for an alternative hegemonic project to produce a new form of common sense – those ideas and dispositions which encompass all facets of everyday life, and which are taken for granted (Gramsci, 1971). Specifically, Gramsci was interested in the role of institutions, such as the Catholic Church, in forging societal forms of common sense. With reference to the 1970s neoliberal counter-revolution, Stuart Hall deployed a Gramscian framework in order to examine how a plurality of discourses were stitched together to create Thatcherism. For Hall (1979, 1980, 2011), Thatcherism was a contingent ideology that reshaped national subjectivities by mobilising the economic crisis to construct an authoritarian populism, which relied upon market rationalities *and* appeals to British nationalism. Further, hegemony is understood as an always incomplete process whereby people, as well as the state, must be actively reproduced and subjectified in order to consent to neoliberal forms of governance. In turn, individuals become implicated in neoliberalism in complex and contradictory ways, for a “tiny bit of all of us is also somewhere inside the Thatcherite project” (Hall, 1988: 165). Contemporarily, Gramscian analyses have cited austerity politics as a hegemonising discourse which is thoroughly embedded within the cultural imaginary (Burron, 2017; Seymour, 2014). Worth (2013), for example, identifies the rise of reactionary alternatives to globalisation – such as religious fundamentalism and right-wing nationalist populism – as providing as solid a base for counter-hegemony as that offered by the traditional left.

Bramall (2013) has also focused upon socio-cultural explanations of austerity, which she sees as a site of discursive struggle between competing visions for the future. Importantly, this work extends beyond both party politics and debates about economic policy into environmental, anti-consumerist, and feminist politics, and into the terrain of media, consumer, and popular culture. This perspective also entails a focus upon people's everyday lives; Etzioni (2014) is therefore concerned with how austerity necessitates a shift in consumption patterns. While structuralist accounts emphasise austerity as a mechanism through which neoliberal hegemony is restored, socio-cultural perspectives posit austerity politics as a much more complex ideological phenomenon (Jensen, 2013). Bramall (2013) thus explores the ways in which the austerity discourse mobilises historical narratives – primarily the experience of ‘austerity Britain’ during World War II and the post-war period – as a representational resource. Through

this popular historical consciousness, which advocates morality, thrift and national unity against adversity, austerity is disseminated via a series of diverse rhetorical devices such as television, recipe books, advertising, and, even, fashion, where the upcycling of clothes represents a certain middle-class fetishisation with austerity, in ways which are generative of cultural capital. The period of imposition was also defined by a series of events which reaffirmed nationalism, such as a royal wedding and the 2012 Summer Olympics. These events also share distinct parallels to earlier Conservative efforts to mobilise wartime rhetoric in the case of the Falklands/Malvinas Dispute (Hall, 1988).

Such accounts also perceptively stress how the notion of thrift has roots in the green movement; austerity, therefore, co-opts pre-existing left politics (Dibley and Neilson, 2010). The value of these understandings is to situate austerity politics as not merely an economic policy, nor as an ideology that belongs to the political right *per se* (Bramall, 2012, 2013). Rather, austerity is an unstable set of discourses and a site of intense discursive struggle, through which diverse social actors seek to further specific political advances and project alternative visions of the future (Hall and Massey, 2012). Consequently, scholars of this standpoint have wondered whether any progressive potential lies in austerity politics. Levitas (2012: 339) has proposed that, in austerity, there lies “the desire for an alternative society”; anti-consumerism, environmental sustainability, and street parties may each point towards possible alternate modes of sociality. Others have noted how the context of post-war austerity invokes the memory of collective solidarity and the founding, rather than the dismantling, of the welfare state (Clarke and Newman, 2012). The consequence of viewing austerity as a discursive site of struggle is to transcend materialist perspectives of neoliberalisation and to rethink how both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic interpretations of histories might serve as a resource from which the germ of a political alternative may emerge.

The literature on austerity as a discursive concept acknowledges that while such politics have clear distributional impacts, austerity is an experiment whose outcomes continue to unfold at a range of spatial scales. In turn, there is requirement to focus upon economic story-telling, in contemporary terms, as a means to understand austerity imposition further (Montgomerie, 2016). The left-wing think-tank, *New Economics Foundation* (NEF), has advanced the notion of economic-storytelling, which is defined as a form of political communication that is consistent, memorable, uses emotional metaphors, and is simple enough to be understood and retold (NEF, 2013). This ‘austerity story’ articulates a clear narrative frame which includes critiquing the size of the UK’s public sector debt and the need for cuts to restore fiscal credibility, as aforementioned. However, NEF (2013) also cites the invocation of a plurality of neoliberal tropes targeted towards the individual within welfare reform, such that austerity will eliminate the ‘skivers’ who enjoy a life funded by state benefits at the expense of ‘strivers’,



who choose to play by the rules, while, through the language of dependency, the Coalition equated individuals' need for welfare with the dependencies of drug addiction. Tyler (2013a, 2013b) and McKenzie (2015) have also written authoritatively from a class-based discourse perspective in tracing the societal shaming of elements of working-class culture through a series of cultural and moral tropes. Under New Labour, the territorial stigmatisation of council estates was met with the emergence of a new social class; the 'chav'. This term was a pejorative and ubiquitous term of abuse and abhorrence for the poor, and was mediated through popular culture (see also Forkert, 2014; Jones, 2011). For Cooper and Whyte (2017), these forms of austerity politics represent a renewed form of institutional violence. These analyses are pertinent to the ways in which certain (ultimately fictional) characterisations come to incite popular consent for the withdrawal of welfare provision. Moreover, it is the quotidian accumulation and repetition of these expressions – enthused with meritocracy – that, in Gramscian terms, allow austerity to derive societal approval.

It was within this context that the Coalition launched the 'Big Society' agenda, which proposed a radical devolution of power amid an attempt to restructure local government and its practices, thereby empowering local people to make public services more accountable. Thus, in 2010, the Coalition argued that "this Spending Review is not just about cutting spending and setting budgets. It will be a complete re-evaluation of the Government's role in providing public services" (HM Treasury, 2010: n.p.). These ideas have been most eloquently advanced by Conservative MP Jesse Norman (2010), who argues that the Big Society seeks to improve public services, rather than undermine them, but is concerned about the state's ability to meet social need within complex, postmodern societies. The prescription is the transfer of power away from the public sector to social enterprises, community groups, the private sector, families, and individuals. Critically, the Big Society posits that the role of the state is not to provide through the public sector, but instead to develop citizens' capacities to meet their own needs, and to provide charitable assistance to others. In this sense, these non-statist conceptions of the good life reflect the kinds of small-is-beautiful ideas developed by the environmental movement, and Holloway's emphasis of communities developing the 'power to', leading some scholars to consider whether there is true progressive potential in Big Society ideas (North, 2011a). However, less sympathetic interpretations maintain that devolution was simply a guise for spending cuts (Tam, 2011), and propose that localism relies upon a construction of 'local people' as homogeneous, undivided and singular, in turn underplaying the power relations, inequalities, and varying levels of social capital which exist within communities (Featherstone *et al.*, 2012). Norman (2010) has deceptively maintained that the Big Society cannot be conceptualised within conventional political categories of left or right; it is about ideas and evidence, rather than politics or ideology. This claim is at once in keeping with the Coalition's

framing of fiscal retrenchment as profoundly un-ideological, yet also reflects an attempted rebranding of the Conservative Party under David Cameron's leadership (2005-16) in order to appear more socially inclusive, environmentally conscious (Evans, 2008; Lister and Bennett, 2010) and, in the words of Jesse Norman MP, 'compassionate' (Norman and Ganesh, 2006). Localism therefore echoes neoliberal tropes that blame the state for promoting selfishness and individualism, and also draws upon more long-standing Conservative traditions of voluntarism and social responsibility (Kearns, 1995), but does also point towards a discursive shift away from neoliberal conceptions of individuals as isolated, rational economic actors and towards an increased emphasis on the functioning of civil society.

This section has shown how neoliberalism arose not just as a result of a materialist response to capitalist crisis, but took place through the forging of a new common sense that depended upon the combination of a plurality of discourses. In the UK context, this required mobilising particular histories and geographies in order to invite the populace to participate in the neoliberal project. Recent work has also illustrated the discursive notions upon which contemporary austerity politics have acquired popular consent. The particular value of this literature is to reveal how and why the working class largely came to accept austerity logics, but it also points towards progressive potential within-and-beyond neoliberal austerity discourse. In contrast to the structuralist accounts outlined in 3.3, austerity cannot be viewed without reference to political discourse, place and lived experience. This also entails a closer reading of the political context within which austerity politics are located. Having done so, section 3.5 now turns to examine the different conceptual frameworks which have been used to measure the impacts of austerity, and considers what their possibilities and limitations are.

### **3.5 Researching the Impacts of Austerity**

In the period following the crisis, macroeconomics has been keen to model the economic effects of fiscal retrenchment, in particular to question whether austerity has expansionary effects, in an attempt to either prove or dispel links between austerity and growth (Carlin and Soskice, 2014; Hall and Lieberman, 2012). It is worth noting that while evidence also exists to the contrary, this literature has effectively demonstrated how, in the UK context: other countries have higher debt-to-GDP ratios; government debt cannot be understood like household or credit card debt; while Labour failed to address the underlying structural problems of the UK economy, overspending was not a cause of the crisis; that significant capital expenditure was necessary given years of underinvestment under successive Conservative regimes; and that cuts in public spending would not necessarily appease bond markets (for a review, see Skidelsky and Fraccaroli, 2017). Such research has also benefitted from an examination of historical episodes of fiscal austerity across different countries (see

Blyth, 2013). This work was accompanied by popular critiques voiced through prominent Keynesian economists, such as Paul Krugman (2015) and Joseph Stiglitz (2010), in leading the campaign for more active fiscal policy. Indeed, by 2016, even officials of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) began to recognise that austerity fosters inequality and unemployment, while creating a drag on long-term growth (Ostry *et al.*, 2016). This work merits recognition, and can be weaponised as part of a powerful counter-narrative to cuts, but it does not engage with *how* austerity is being politicised, mobilised and contested at a variety of scales. This has entailed a renewed focus on cities as sites of neoliberal restructuring through the politics of ‘austerity urbanism’. This notion observes how austerity is devolved to the municipal scale, how blame and responsibility is subsequently displaced, and what the material consequences for cities are. In turn, local states have become complicit in internalising austerity logic through which the urban landscape is being remade (Davidson and Ward, 2014; Peck, 2012). However, these accounts also underplay the extent to which local governments can be crucial actors in reworking the terms of austerity urbanism, a framework which is further analysed in Chapter 5.

Austerity has also been understood through the lens of electoral politics, opinion polls and attitude surveys. Literature in electoral studies has examined the reaction of voters to the performance of their respective governments in tackling the economic crisis, and has shown how consent for austerity has varied across electoral contexts (Clarke *et al.*, 2016; Magalhães, 2015; Teperoglou *et al.*, 2014). In Britain, research has shown that the majority of voters believed that: budget cuts were essential; public spending causes sovereign debt; and public sector cuts will strengthen the economy (YouGov, 2015), although in recent years critics of austerity have finally begun to gain traction (Whiteley *et al.*, 2013). Analysis of survey data has demonstrated the importance of trust, economic credibility, and strong leaders, for political parties (Borges *et al.*, 2013; Clarke *et al.*, 2009). Research in management studies has also explored how governments have responded to fiscal stress with various proportions of decline, cutbacks, retrenchment and downsizing (Overmans and Noordegraaf, 2014), while health research has shown how austerity has a negative impact on both physical and mental well-being (Green *et al.*, 2017), and led to increased rates of suicide (Antonakakis and Collins, 2014). In addition, others have developed a spatial reading of the crisis, illustrating the uneven geographical impacts of austerity at the global (Kitson *et al.*, 2011), regional (Ballas *et al.*, 2017), national (Meegan *et al.*, 2014), and household scales (Kennett *et al.*, 2015). While, again, productive in providing a broader political context for austerity, this research constructs the notion of austerity as mediated ‘from above’, which then impacts upon the ‘victims’ of people and place. While Bailey and Shibata (2017) show how statistical methods can be used

to identify austerity contestation, this is not a sufficient antidote to understanding austerity as a lived encounter.

While geographers have provided much insight into the economic impacts of austerity, until recently there had been a notable lack of attention paid to how the recent crisis has been experienced at the more personal and intimate scales, such as within families and households. Consequently, a now burgeoning body of literature has begun to address the impacts of austerity politics within a socio-cultural framework, which engages with the ways in which people actually experience austerity within the everyday. This has involved repositioning children, youth and families as the focus of inquiry by interrogating, to give some examples, how households are becoming implicated within care-giving as a result of cut-backs in social care (Jupp, 2017); the relationship between young people and debt (Horton, 2017), and young people's pursuit and acquisition of cultural capital in austere times (Holdsworth, 2017). Others have demonstrated the increasing prominence of food banks in the provision of charitable care (Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2017). Research within this framework has also documented how austerity has disproportionate impacts upon women (MacLeavy, 2011), ethnic minorities (Emejulu and Bassel, 2015), and disabled people (Cross, 2013). On an institutional level, Liverpool City Council commissioned research into the effects of austerity on thirty families in low-paid employment; the results paint a picture of the rising cost of living, job insecurity, increased income inequality, and negative impacts upon health (Kyprianou, 2015).

Taking a closer reading of the everyday realities of austere life in the UK has profound consequences for how austerity is conceptualised, its impacts are analysed, and responses to it are understood. This literature thus points towards a deep-seated internalisation of austerity politics at the individual level, in which individuals direct blame and anger onto themselves and others for their own apparent financial shortcomings or precariousness, in line with discourses promulgated at the national level (Hall, 2016; O'Hara, 2014). Coleman (2016) utilises affect in order to explain how the 'politics of pessimism' became a 'national mood' during the onset of austerity. Through focus groups, Stanley (2014) also shows how the public acquiesce to austerity through internalising such discourses as 'we're reaping what we sowed', while the slow, erosive degeneration of public services through austerity – termed 'the creep' – also has implications for everyday consent to austerity policies (Hitchen, 2016). Finally, while structural accounts usefully identify how austerity reconfigures a new economic settlement, feminist research has identified how the post-crisis austerity climate is also forging a new gender contract (McDowell, 2017),

The concurrent theme running throughout this chapter is that no singular analytical frame is sufficient to account for the diverse set of processes which constitute austerity. This section

has observed that political economy accounts have fruitfully traced the macroeconomic processes through which fiscal retrenchment is enacted, and a Keynesian counter-narrative has been introduced. Work in political science has also illuminated how austerity is ratified from above, and that austerity has uneven geographical impacts of austerity. Geographical interventions from a feminist and socio-cultural perspective then brought about a welcome focus on the everyday, in ways which surpass reductionist analyses. However, existent literature has continued to underplay the ways in which austerity has been mediated locally, and has been enacted and contested through particular histories, geographies, and place-based politics. Section 3.6 now moves to consider how anti-austerity has been theorised hitherto, and whether such conceptualisations attempt to reconcile the politics of austerity, place, and lived experience.

### **3.6 Possibilities and Limits in Times of Crisis: Responses from the Left**

This final section concludes the chapter by examining the possibilities and limits for the political left within the current conjuncture. It first reviews the lessons of the 1980s (3.6.1) and secondly, in 3.6.2, examines how present-day responses from the political left have been theorised within the scholarly literature.

#### *3.6.1 Local (Government) Responses: A Review*

During the 1960s and 1970s, scant attention was paid to the site of municipal government as one where radical change could be enacted; it was a political backwater, in which city authorities made “practical, non-political decisions” led by the judgement of professional officers (Lansley *et al.*, 1989: 1). Indeed, until the late 1970s, the primary function of municipal governance was characterised by managerialism, as local states remained wedded to the Fordist-Keynesian accumulation regime and generally supported fiscal policies for “full employment, economic growth, and the welfare of citizens” (Harvey, 2003: 10). Under Thatcherism, however, this ‘old’ urban politics was radically displaced by a new mode of ‘flexible accumulation’, as capital – in response to the escalating fiscal crisis of the state – sought new markets for accumulation (as discussed in 3.3.2). In turn, attention shifted away from the local state as a site of collective consumption and redistribution and, instead, towards a narrower focus on entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989; Jessop, 1993). In response to the rolling-back of the local state through fiscal retrenchment, it becomes the duty of the local authority, rather than the nation state, to negotiate with international finance capital and to “maximise the attractiveness of the local site as a lure for capitalist development” (Harvey, 1989: 5). Cities, according to this doctrine, must compete in order to exploit their relative competitive advantage and to remove potential barriers to business (Peterson, 1981). Within the UK, the restructuring of urban politics during the 1980s was accompanied by pre-existing

critiques from both the political left and right about the inability of local government to meet the needs of citizens in a modern, complex society (Cochrane *et al.*, 1996). Whilst the exploits of the New Right were previously mentioned, the New Left regarded local authority control as authoritarian, paternalistic and inflexible, and identified local government as functioning merely as part of the capitalist state apparatus. Marxist critiques called for a radical overhaul of the existing relationship between councils and citizens, including decentralisation, participatory structures, and new methods for delivering services (Cockburn, 1977; London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1979). In parallel, the New Left was responding to the ongoing fragmentation of the traditional (white) working class, and reworking its stance to promote the rights of those minority groups previously excluded from labour politics. They therefore overtly confronted issues of racism, sexism and other forms of structural discrimination (Lansley *et al.*, 1989). Unlike Militant in Liverpool, New Left-inspired authorities promoted local government as the site for the promotion of radical urban politics (Wainwright, 1987). The restructuring of urban governance throughout the 1980s was, in the British context, a decidedly contested process welcomed by contrasting political interests, albeit with radically different agendas.

Within the context of national electoral defeat and the loss of hegemony, local authorities formed the battleground where the left might exercise power. For the Trotskyist left, local councils should have been used as a vehicle to mobilise a broad alliance to oppose government policies and to implement municipal socialism, while confrontation would have allowed for the possibility of mobilising a general strike to force the removal of the Thatcher government (Taaffe and Mulhearn, 1988). Where Kinnock advocated the ‘dented shield’ approach, sympathisers with the confrontation strategy argued that this would ultimately trap the left into implementing cuts at the expense of political support. Yet, while the Trotskyist approach gained favour in Liverpool, other sections of the left were more enthusiastically embracing plans to reform local councils through progressive policies, decentralisation, and improved services (Gyford, 1985). Some council services had become indefensible, and merely provided the opportunity for Tory-led structural reform (Wilson and Game, 2006). However, one of the key tensions was the extent to which left councils focused on improving the pay and working conditions of staff at the expense of consumers, whose pockets suffered (Lansley *et al.*, 1989). As the decade wore on, and strategies of confrontation collapsed, left councils began to renege on their commitments to municipal socialism and instead adopted stronger forms of corporate managerialism (Corrigan *et al.*, 1988). Local government has thus historically provided a dilemma for the left, conceived as either a hotbed of revolutionary politics or a site for radical innovative service delivery and participatory forms of governance. One must also situate the confrontational strategies of the 1980s in a context in which the cuts were widely understood

as a temporary response to economic conditions that would pass; only with hindsight might leftists understand the magnitude of this shift towards a new mode of accumulation (Talbot and Talbot, 2011). In the present conjuncture, austerity has been more commonly typified by acquiescence to cuts at the municipal scale, rather than overt confrontation (Fuller and West, 2017). This is partly attributable to increased statutory restraints, as well as the lack of credible alternatives (Davies and Blanco, 2017). According to this literature, the experiences of the 1980s have had profound consequences for post-crisis responses of the left, leading to a state of paralysis at the municipal scale. Chapter 5 returns to examine this hypothesis in further detail.

### 3.6.2 *Post-Crisis Responses of the Political Left*

With the crisis first met by fiscal stimulus, protests did not begin to emerge until the politics of austerity began to take shape in 2010, both in the UK and in Europe, and the impacts upon people's everyday lives became fully evident. Strikes, mass demonstrations, and often violent confrontations with the police swept southern Europe, while the UK also initially witnessed a number of protests. In November 2010, 30,000 - 50,000 students demonstrated in opposition to proposed spending cuts in further education and, in March 2011, the Trades Union Congress led the *March for the Alternative*; 250,000 people opposed public spending cuts and demanded "jobs, growth, justice". In June 2011, public sector workers held a one-day strike to oppose the raising of the retirement age. In addition, *UK Uncut* – a grassroots campaign group against tax avoidance – performed direct action, targeting for disruption a number of high-street stores. Urban riots followed in August 2011, and then the *Occupy* movement, in line with the explosion of protest camps worldwide (Brown *et al.*, 2017). However, while austerity was greeted with a turn to radical politics in Greece and Spain, commentators note the relative lack of observable contestation in the UK (Worth, 2013), although others equally suggest that the turn to extra-parliamentary politics was the most significant since the poll tax civil disobedience campaign of the 1980s (Bailey, 2014). Hence, left responses to the crisis, for some, acknowledged a political crisis as well as an economic one, and were thus prefigured towards building egalitarian spaces which rejected elite conceptualisations of citizen participation and imagined new ways of creating democracy based upon a repudiation of the neoliberal political model (della Porta, 2013; Douzinas, 2013). To sum, responses to the crisis – what Tilly (1986) terms 'action repertoires' – can be categorised as i) social-democratic electoralism and radical left party agitation; ii) trade union organising; and iii) grassroots direct action (Bailey *et al.*, 2016), although in Greece and Spain these responses were intertwined (Davies, 2017a). In the UK, however, resistance was characterised by typically ephemeral, isolated and defensive struggles that did not resonate with a wider programme of social change

(Dean, 2015). It was therefore widely held that the political right had mobilised the crisis much more effectively than the left (Srnicek and Williams, 2015).

The perceived failure of the left has perturbed authors such as Winlow *et al.* (2015), who explain that far-right street activity has bred as a result. Adopting a post-political approach, the authors suggest that such groups draw almost exclusively from members of Britain's old white working class, the former support ground of the left. The majority, they argue, "are simply disaffected, aggrieved and forgotten young and middle-aged men" who are responding to the disintegration of their communities and the disappearance of traditional forms of work that have "cast the white working class as entirely redundant, out of place and out of time" (Winlow *et al.*, 2015: 105). The extension of this argument is that the left has 'lost' its traditional support base and is, perversely, at war with it. Accordingly, this results from the failure of the left to propose credible political alternatives. Worth (2013) also follows such lines; through Gramsci, he argues that the failure of the left to acquire hegemony has paved the way for reactionary alternatives within the political moment. Others have taken aim at what they characterise as the left's obsession with failure as a melancholic attachment, where social movements narcissistically delight in small gains at the expense of building for meaningful political change (Dean, 2012). Finally, a range of critical theorists has targeted a perceived conservatism on the left, where contemporary anti-austerity strategies are rooted in a regressive nostalgia for the Keynesian welfare state, rather than being orientated towards developing new forms of radicalism (Seymour, 2014). For Srnicek and Williams (2015), this involves building a counter-hegemonic strategy with the capacity to shape a new common sense, to redefine the possibilities of economics, and to repurpose new and future technological infrastructures. Equally, others have called for a left populism with the capacity to reunite previously disparate forces and actors (Thomas and Tufts, 2016). Accompanying this general sense of defeatism is the viewpoint that social-democratic parties are unsuited to the task at hand. These parties have tended towards a politics of no alternative following the crisis and, across Europe, have enacted austerity measures when in power. This is in contrast to the 1970s where, in the UK, radical alternatives were experimented with, such as the Alternative Economic Strategy and Lucas Plan (Radice, 2012).

This section, split into two parts, has examined how the scholarly literature has theorised the trajectories, and possibilities and limits for the political left following the crisis. Section 3.6.1 reviewed the lessons derived from local government responses to cuts in the 1980s. The core message so far is that while local authorities were previously considered to be a credible site of political resistance, the current consensus is one of acquiescence to cuts at the municipal scale. In 3.6.2, the section observed that while some anti-austerity resistance has been present within the UK, commentators were typically pessimistic about the possibilities that this



offered, and tended to suggest that the left has failed to move beyond a necessary critique of austerity towards articulating and embracing credible political alternatives. However, much of this theorising lacks suitable engagement with the diverse forms of “actually existing contestation that are taking place” (Nolan and Featherstone, 2015: 351). This includes a lack of emphasis on the organic evolution of resistance, in order to examine how and why certain forms of resistance appear, and how they are shut down or remade. Such work is sparse, but that which engages with actually existing forms of anti-austerity contestation from the bottom-up has proved productive in this regard. This also entails a necessity to engage with the various geographies through which the crisis is being contested, which is hitherto an under-examined yet valuable endeavour (Featherstone, 2015). Knight (2013) is one such exemplar; using ethnography, he illustrates how blame, accountability, and austerity politics are, in Greece, simultaneously reworked through particular local contexts. However, more must be done here.

In turn, this thesis will advance a novel ‘more-than-cuts’ approach for conceptualising anti-austerity politics, which conceives resistance as being beyond protesting cuts and is instead productive of crafting new political terrain and political identities. Transcending the singular analytical frames typically applied in the current literature, a ‘more-than-cuts’ approach is characterised by the following aspects. First, it develops engaged accounts of anti-austerity resistance from the bottom-up, which allow us to engage with those forms of ‘actually existing contestation’ that are taking place *on their own terms*. Secondly, as a result, this allows for more complex, grounded, situated and relational understandings of why and how resistance does or does not emerge, beyond blanket interpretations forwarded by post-political theory. To this end, one can observe how local resistance is highly contextual, and relies upon factors operating at a variety of different temporal and spatial scales. Thirdly, through this, a more-than-cuts approach places emphasises on the geographies of anti-austerity politics, where resistance is productive of political identities meeting and reforming as part of an assemblage. This also highlights the inherent spatialities to (anti-)austerity; a more-than-cuts approach elaborates upon how (and why) a mortgage crisis in the US catalyses significant social and political upheaval in a city in north-west England. Finally, this approach allows for a more nuanced appraisal of the possibilities and limitations of anti-austerity politics by observing it within its contextual settings to show how, despite its status as notionally ‘anti’, these responses cannot be conceived as simply reactive, but are instead suggestive of shifting the political landscape across both temporal and spatial scales.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how research on neither austerity nor anti-austerity politics has adopted a place-centric frame of analysis. Having highlighted lacunae within existing research,

the chapter has laid the foundations for the ‘more-than-cuts’ framework for understanding anti-austerity resistance, which is discussed later in the thesis. The rationale for this framework is that, while there are many conceptual devices for understanding how the crisis operated and what the responses to it were, no singular analytical frame can adequately capture the diverse set of processes which constitute austerity. The chapter has situated austerity within its broader historical, geographical and political context, and began by examining the onset of the crisis and how this was mediated in the UK (3.2). In 3.3, the chapter traced the genealogy of austerity politics in order to locate them as part of the wider trajectory of neoliberalism. Section 3.4 explored research on the cultural politics of austerity, which demonstrated how neoliberal austerity emerges as both a material *and* ideological responses to capital crises. The literature also considers how, if one is to understand austerity as a class project, austerity has acquired popular consent. The subsequent section, 3.5, argued for the necessity of a closer reading of the everyday realities of austere life in the UK, which in turn has consequences for how individuals respond to austerity. Finally, section 3.6 reviewed research on anti-austerity resistance, and proposed a more bottom-up engagement which reflects the spatialities of anti-austerity politics and their associated activities. While each of these analyses have proved partially fruitful, the more-than-cuts approach will be shown to open up fundamentally new understandings of how the crisis is being politicised. The reader is therefore reminded that while this chapter presents an overview, more specific conceptual frameworks are introduced in each of the three following empirical chapters.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Researching Anti-Austerity Politics: A Methodological Approach**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the methodology employed in conducting research for this thesis on anti-austerity politics in Liverpool. First, section 4.2 situates the epistemology within feminist and poststructuralist critiques of objectivist research and, thereafter, argues for situated knowledge which identifies and embraces the emergent political aims of research. The thesis thus acknowledges the recent shift in human geography towards advancing struggles over social justice (Autonomous Geographies Collective, hereafter AGC, 2010). This transition represents a radical departure from scholarly orthodoxies of academic knowledge extraction towards facilitating the production of partisan knowledge. Having addressed these points, section 4.3 reviews those methodological approaches previously developed to undertake collaborative and non-hierarchical forms of political research. Section 4.4 examines the specific research design of this thesis, which was informed through this epistemology; this included 21 months of intensive politically-engaged ‘activist’ ethnography, 26 interviews ‘as conversations’ (North, 2011b) with anti-austerity actors, nine semi-structured interviews with councillors representing Liverpool City Council, and content analysis. Cumulatively, this allowed the researcher to garner a rich, in-depth exploration of the politics of austerity and anti-austerity in the locale. Section 4.5 rationalises the research design in accordance with the suite of politically-engaged methods introduced in section 4.3, and analyses the various practical and epistemological potentialities, contradictions and limitations of this specific methodological approach when it is utilised within the ‘messy’ realities of social movements. Accordingly, section 4.5 discusses how the research began from a position that was critically committed to local anti-austerity politics and the politics of partisan knowledge production; this position changed over the course of the research to one that was, at heart, sympathetic, yet unconvinced as to the credibility of the different political alternatives envisaged by grassroots activists. That said, the methods deployed allowed for a deeper reading of the politics of anti-austerity, and these are presented in the remainder of this thesis.

#### **4.2 A Militant Epistemology**

A researcher’s choice of methods is shaped by the ontological and epistemological assumptions that they make (Bryman, 2008). The scientific paradigm of positivism proposes that all knowledge about the world stems from empirical observation, independent of the observer, and that knowledge not of this origin falls outside the purview of science (Stockman, 1983). Objectivism is the epistemological underpinning of positivism, and it follows that if the

scientific tenets of reliability and validity are adhered to, then the apparent ‘truth’ will emerge (Robson, 1993). Research that does not subscribe to these rules is deemed methodologically flawed and is believed to produce an inaccurate, or ‘untrue’, account, and total objectivity is therefore seen as both possible and desirable (Westmarland, 2001). However, feminist and poststructuralist standpoints have focused on the obfuscation of power relations within this paradigm, and have critiqued the production of ‘incontestable’ knowledge (Harding, 1987; McDowell, 1992). Such critiques question *how* knowledge is produced, by *whom*, and *how* it is used (Mies, 1983; Oakley, 1974). Through this lens, positivism systematically (re)produces patriarchy and oppression, and it is therefore imperative both to interrogate *whose* knowledge one is forwarding (Haraway, 1988; Stanley and Wise, 1983), and to ask how and why knowledge is *not* produced, or is subjugated, or even obliterated (Dubois, 1983; Rose, 1997). In turn, feminists argue for situating knowledge in order to avoid portraying the distant, yet all-seeing, researcher. Reflexivity is thus “the self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher” (England, 1994: 82), and involves making visible the power relations between the researcher and his/her subjects, and reflecting upon the situatedness of knowledge. This requires paying attention to the multiple positionalities of the researcher and consideration for the ways in which these identities may influence and shape the research encounter (Hopkins, 2007; Mohammad, 2001). The objective here is not to expose the researcher’s influence as a somewhat obstructive interference to this apparent ‘truth-relaying’ method, nor to remould the researcher into one free of bias, but to instead reconceptualise the research process as one that constructs partisan knowledges which contest oppression and engender alternative ways of knowing (Haraway, 1987). The researcher is not, therefore, conceived as an ‘expert’ who harbours privileged access to the ‘truth’, but is instead tasked with embracing the explicitly political nature of the research and ‘taking sides’ (Roseneil, 1993), according to their own ‘standpoint’ (McDowell, 1992).

These developments have been influential within human geography, where geographers have increasingly sought to address the politics of fieldwork, representational strategies and collaborative research. Since the 1990s, the discipline has undergone a ‘cultural turn’ in which more interpretive methodologies have been promoted in order to ‘get at’ human experience and to explore the social and cultural nuance of individuals’ lives (Pile, 1991). During the 2000s, participatory approaches have also gained popularity; the key epistemological goal within such approaches has been to destabilise traditional barriers between the researcher and the researched, and to produce spaces for collaboration and the co-production of knowledge (Wynne-Jones *et al.*, 2015). Within this context, some have gone further in advocating militant research, defined as an approach to knowledge production based upon researcher engagement with participants across shared political goals (Colectivo Situaciones, 2003; Shukaitis and

Graeber, 2007). From its recent historical roots in the workers' inquiries of 1960s Italy to later research on the alter-globalisation movement, militant research has sought to wholly eradicate the division between movement participants and the researcher, and to problematise the binary which views the former as simply 'mindless campaigners' and the latter as critical intellectuals capable of achieving objective and rational judgment (Chatterton, 2006; Halvorsen, 2015; Maxey, 2004). In social movement research, much theorising has, as a consequence, turned to consider how to combine activism with research, with the aim of challenging social injustices and contributing to the transformation of the social movement(s) that the researcher is engaged with (Fuller, 1999; Routledge, 2009). In practice, for some, this means making strategic interventions collectively with social movements and producing movement-relevant, emancipatory knowledge in which the researcher is actively implicated in taking sides, and seeks to challenge those authoritative and normative accounts which underpin social injustice (AGC, 2010). In line with feminist epistemology, partisan knowledges must be constructed as tools, which can be mobilised to create new ways of seeing or affecting the world (Deleuze and Foucault, 2004; Russell, 2015).

Militant research runs parallel to a commitment to initiating social struggle beyond the academy (Routledge, 1996). Such epistemologies begin by engaging with critiques of the 'ivory tower' and the neoliberal university, and portray its researchers as privileged intellectuals who are implicated in creating injustices through their ability to (re)produce normative accounts. While Kitchen and Hubbard (1999: 196) earlier remarked that geography is replete with academics who build careers on researching the oppressed, "but, paradoxically, rarely join with them in their struggle", more recent scholarly activist engagements have sought to fuse such politics and academic research agendas into one coherent strategy (see AGC, 2010). This has been combined with the development of alternative yardsticks by which to judge academic research, such as the capacity to improve subjugated people's lives, either in consciousness-raising or emancipation, and measuring the 'success' of research through the extent to which it positively impacts upon the movement milieu (Russell, 2015). Located within this militant epistemological framework, this thesis rejects objectivism and views knowledge as socially constructed and value-laden, where social relations are understood as the complex outcome of interactions between individuals, power and agency. It follows that an appropriate methodology had to be found in order to embrace the political aspects of research.

### **4.3 Theorising Political Research**

Various options have been prescribed for performing political research within the academy, and this section reviews the relative merits and drawbacks of each of these approaches by

which one can conduct rigorous critical inquiry in the pursuit of social change and social justice. Thereafter, in section 4.4, the specific approach utilised within this thesis for investigating anti-austerity politics in Liverpool is discussed.

#### *4.3.1 Political Research from the Academy*

Participatory action research (PAR) represents one such method to reject objectivity and the desire to achieve neutrality within the field. PAR criticises conventional research methods for their tendency to externally develop research designs and to extract data from the field, while the results are disseminated in scholarly journals producing few positive impacts for the researched communities themselves (Kesby, 2000; Kindon, 2005). Instead, PAR seeks to affirm the participants' rights and capacities to effect change themselves (Pain, 2004). Its central tenets include: the co-production and co-ownership of the research *with* participants; bringing 'new voices' into the academy to ensure that research is "appropriate, meaningful and relevant" to communities (Kesby *et al.*, 2005: 164); and facilitating participants' empowerment and decision-making in their own lives (Cahill, 2007; Sultana, 2007). PAR is, therefore, not just a methodology, but a 'political statement' committed to a collaborative and non-hierarchical approach that democratises knowledge production alongside a concurrent commitment to positive change (Klocker, 2012). However, despite its growing popularity, much of PAR's initial political impetus has been absent or lost in an array of self-proclaimed participatory projects (Wynne-Jones *et al.*, 2015). PAR has also often failed to shrug off the aura of paternalism, whereby the researcher remains framed as the expert (Mason, 2015). The methodology has frequently suffered from a lack of enthusiasm and cooperation from participants, and the results obtained have tended to fail to effect either social or political change (AGC, 2010). This has led to an increasing recognition that participatory approaches are not inherently progressive; others have gone further and described PAR as a new form of 'tyranny' which masks power relations and external agendas (Cooke and Kothari, 2001).

However, PAR constitutes just one strand of what is broadly conceived as politically-engaged research. Touraine's Sociological Intervention has been used effectively by North (1998), where, through focus groups, the researcher provoked alternative analyses of the politics of Local Exchange Trading Schemes. The traditional ethnographic method of 'participant observation' has also seen an inversion towards 'observant participation', with a greater emphasis on the role of observing *while one participates* as a means to most usefully 'give back' or contribute to a movement's aims (Moeran, 2007), whilst also engaging with the materiality of activist practices and spaces (Brown, 2007). Khasnabish and Haiven (2015) advocate an approach which is defined by working 'outside but alongside' their constituencies of concern using collaborative and accessible methods such as websites and audio

documentary. Each of these represents an increasing concern for, and differing degrees of, political engagement with the various groups that the researcher is committed to. Finally, Dorling and Shaw (2002) have stressed the need for policy-orientated research in order to bring geographers into public debate.

#### *4.3.2 Activist Ethnographies*

A burgeoning body of literature has developed around the value of ethnographic methods for combining activism with research. Here, ethnography is not merely a series of techniques and procedures used to elicit thick description, but a perspective committed to taking seriously people's lived realities and the context and meaning which underpins them (Bourdieu, 1977; Geertz, 2005; Wacquant, 1992). Politically-engaged ethnographic research must, therefore, assume a different posture to that of ethnographic methodologies located inside objectivist paradigms. This is because the aim is not to achieve 'better data', but to facilitate critical and collective inquiry amongst movement actors. Social movements are thus conceived as spaces of knowledge production in their own right, rather than simply objects of research interest (Chesters, 2012; Cox, 2015). The radical application of ethnographic methods constitutes somewhat of a spectrum, and the levels of collaboration vary considerably. Paul Routledge advocated using the 'third-space' as a site of critical engagement; that which exists in between academia and activism, where researchers should use the academy as a "political site from which various struggles can be constructively critiqued" (1996: 402). In practice, this means leveraging opportunities provided by the university to create resources for movements that they might not otherwise have access to (Khasnabish and Haiven, 2015). It also includes contributing the researcher's academic labour to a specific political cause, rather than seeking intellectual recognition, promotion or remuneration (de Certeau, 1984). In a similar vein, Graeber (2007: 305) has promoted ethnography as a model for how "non-vanguardist revolutionary intellectual practice" might work. However, for Speed (2006), the minimum requirements for activist research are simply involving the participants in decisions about the research, and committing to contribute something to their struggle.

One particularly influential contribution to the debate has been Juris' (2007) notion of militant ethnography. This concept sees the researcher committing him or herself to the movement milieu and co-producing radical knowledge on behalf of the movement, rather than for any academic exercise. In militant ethnography, the researcher deploys collaboratively produced ethnographic methods which aim to dissolve the chasm between research and practice by facilitating "ongoing activist (self-)reflection regarding movement goals, tactics, strategies and organisational forms" (Juris, 2007: 165). Following Juris, Russell (2015: 225) further defines the method of militant ethnography as the collective identification of some problematic or

contradiction inherent within a social movement, *from within*, which then “striv[es] to understand and contribute to the collective surpassing of this paradox”. For the militant ethnographer, it is insufficient to simply do politics ‘in the field’ and then retreat to generate intellectual scholarly theory; rather, they must practice politics critically by getting their ‘hands dirty’ and putting their ‘body on the line’ through participating in the contingent struggles of the given movement (Gordon, 2007; Parr, 2001). This approach destabilises the positivist dichotomy between the detached and disembodied academic observer versus the uncritical, antagonistic activist by remaining “committed and critical” to those movement politics (Fuller, 1999: 225), and engendering support and solidarity (Otto and Terhorst, 2011). Juris (2007: 165) elaborates:

Simply taking on the role of ‘circumstantial activist’ is not sufficient. One has to build long-term relationships of mutual commitment and trust, become entangled with complex relations of power, and live the emotions associated with direct action organising and activist networking [...] rather than generating sweeping strategic and/or political directives.

In contrast to conventional research methodologies, the militant ethnographer does not revert to producing objectivist theories; instead they facilitate self-reflection through valorising the participants’ own knowledges and critical capacities (Juris and Razsa, 2012). This also recognises the existent self-critical proficiencies of activists – including their increasing ability to self-publish – and thus undermines the assumption that political groups depend on ‘expert’ scholarly theorising. That said, the intention is not to reaffirm the political tendencies of the movement uncritically, and researchers must continue to reflect upon the politics of representation.

#### *4.3.3 Reflections on the Challenges and Limits of Political Research*

Most recently, the constraints and limits of conducting activist ethnographies have been called into question. While militant ethnography is reasonably well-defined for those operating within or across relatively bounded, small-scale and homogeneous forms of political activity, the methodology is less instructive for engaging with movements in different and more challenging contexts. Russell’s (2015) use of militant ethnography, for example, depended upon his specific circumstance of already being an active component of the movement milieu, but this offers little guidance for researchers seeking to engage with movements with whom they sympathise, but are not (yet) active participants. Further, the method is incompatible with attempts to study movements whom the researcher does not sympathise with at all, such as the far-right (Gillan and Pickerill, 2012). Those who have researched more spatially extensive or networked forms of political activity (such as Davies, 2009; Halvorsen, 2015) also challenge the types of observation or political commitment that an ethnographer can feasibly make.



There is also a further fear that while some movement actors may be receptive to the reflexive contributions emerging from activist ethnographic observation, others are likely to perceive it as nothing more than an academic exercise with little substantive interest or impact for debates within the group itself (Martinez and Lorenzi, 2012). Activist ethnographies also risk reinforcing hetero-normative and macho framings of ‘capital A’ activism which are both exclusive and disempowering (see Garrett, 2013; Routledge, 2002). For Maxey (1999), capital A activism fetishises participation in certain activities, such as direct action, in ways which potentially solidify social injustices rather than challenging them. In turn, while recognising that activism has informed their work, some researchers have abandoned or rejected the label of scholar-activist (Brown, 2007; North, 2011b). In response, Taylor (2015) argues for adoption of the less prescriptive notion of simply ‘being useful’. This involves developing more inclusive conceptualisations of political engagement and collaborative research which accept the need to destabilise the intellectual-activist and research-practice binary, but not in ways which privilege capital A forms of activism. This perspective emphasises the myriad understated ways in which a researcher can be useful to social movements, such as mobilising academic resources and exploiting and creating ‘cracks’ which rework and reimagine the roles and functions of the neoliberal university itself (Holloway, 2010).

Within the context of actually existing forms of anti-austerity politics in Liverpool, and my own positionality which saw austerity as a regressive political programme that I wanted to see overturned (see 4.4.1), I developed a form of activist ethnography that would minimise the power imbalances existing between the researcher and movement actors, whilst simultaneously promoting an ethics of reciprocity through which I could feasibly ‘give back’ to the movement milieu. This was at once mindful of Taylor’s (2015) critique of capital A activism and suitable for a positionality that, at the outset of the research, was critically committed to anti-austerity politics and sought to facilitate critical self-reflection. I was not an expert at the beginning of the research process, and was instead committed to democratising the production of knowledge and privileging the knowledge of movement participants. Contra PAR, I also supposed that a worthy and extensive political project already existed – to oppose austerity through various anti-austerity campaigns – and that it would not be appropriate to seek an alternative research pathway that might fail to galvanise the enthusiasm and cooperation of activists involved, or adopt an approach that would result in placing an intensive burden on their time. It would also have been unethical to lure individuals into participating in a research project under the premise that it would produce positive social change; a goal that I certainly could not guarantee. Deploying an activist ethnographic approach therefore provided opportunities to engage with movement actors and the milieu *on their terms*, and also allowed me to contribute in ways that might have been genuinely useful

to their political praxis. Paraphrasing North (2011b), this specific approach opened up a space in which to develop a sympathetic critique of the politics of anti-austerity from the perspective of a politically-engaged, supportive, yet critical, academic who was committed to collaborating in order to find ways in which the activism could be more effective. Moreover, although activist ethnographies define a clear epistemological and political stance, what the method actually entails is highly context-dependent, as its proponents readily concede (Colectivo Situaciones, 2007). This review therefore suggests utilising the existing literature on politically-engaged research as a guide, but the definition of a precise methodology could only be determined once the researcher was fully immersed within the milieu. The following section discusses the exact research design, and how this centred on the logic of the aforementioned political commitment.

#### **4.4 Research Design**

The remainder of this chapter defines, discusses and reflects upon my own experience of researching anti-austerity politics in Liverpool as informed by these debates. This section examines: the initial motivations for conducting the research project (4.4.1); the significance of Liverpool as the site of study (4.4.2); how various aspects of the movement were identified and selected (4.4.3); how an activist ethnography was applied (4.4.4); the interviewing of activists (4.4.5); the interviewing of city councillors (4.4.6); content analysis (4.4.7); the analysis of the data (4.4.8); ethical considerations (4.4.9); and, finally, the presentation of the research (4.4.10).

##### *4.4.1 Motivations*

Where research is to be considered a political process of producing partisan knowledge, the researcher's predispositions should, from the outset, be examined reflexively. In this 'standpoint approach', the researcher's personal and political commitments and values are fully revealed, although this positionality is dynamic and may change throughout the research period (discussed in 4.5). This is not 'navel-gazing', but concerns reasserting those core feminist principles. Despite my having been fortunate enough to secure PhD funding, the motivations for conducting this research were foremost personal and political rather than professional. In line with scholar-activist accounts, the reasons for this research were twofold. First, since my early childhood, I have identified with left politics and possessed a strong working-class identity, predominantly because of the influence of my grandfather, who himself came from a fiercely Labour-supporting family.<sup>19</sup> As illustrated in Chapter 7, such

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<sup>19</sup> My great-grandfather, George Blamire, served as a councillor at municipal or county level for almost thirty years, from 1935-62, and gave over fifty years of service to the Labour Party and his trade union. In 1986, my grandfather, Jim Blamire, was elected a ward councillor and, in May 1999, he won a landslide, realising over 87 per cent of the vote. Their socialist credentials in Westmorland are

formative experiences are integral to shaping one's moral and political values, and this identity provided a reference point for much of my early life. This passion was further aroused after I moved to Liverpool in 2009 to read for an undergraduate honours degree in Geography. This coincided with the election of the Coalition Government in May 2010 and the introduction of the politics of austerity, which I identified as being a regressive programme which increases social inequalities and causes immense human suffering. This politicisation was intensified when the primary party of opposition, Labour, seemed unwilling to challenge the austerity policies implemented. The following years witnessed the rise of a number of post-crisis movements, and I began to more critically interrogate the need for alternative forms of socio-political organisation. This ran parallel to my growing appreciation of, and interest in, the politics and political identity of Liverpool, which I had first encountered through my activism with *Spirit of Shankly*, a grassroots Liverpool Football Club Supporters' Union (Chapter 2). I had also observed the politics of austerity at the local level (such as in the local media) and began to perceive the probable symptoms, such as a notable rise in city-centre homelessness. I also identified a number of political groups that were challenging austerity locally, and started to take an interest in their discourses. Despite not being at the 'sharp end' of austerity – that is, a primary victim of some of the harshest welfare measures enacted – I nonetheless felt solidarity with those individuals who were, and also wanted to challenge the structural forces of neoliberalism.

Secondly, this research emerged out of a personal interest in the principles of politically-engaged research. I also wished to test its methodological boundaries. I was inspired by those previous executions of activist ethnographies, and actively wanted to take a side and leverage my relatively privileged position, as a funded research student, so that I might provide resources to anti-austerity groups. This was because I strongly identified with the politics of reciprocity (Gillan and Pickerill, 2012). I also aimed to valorise the knowledges of grassroots political actors themselves, and I was also opposed to assuming the position of the 'expert' intellectual. At the same time, I was cautious of capital A activist ethnographies and sought to identify other ways of 'being useful'. Unlike Russell (2015), I did not begin as an active member of any anti-austerity group; rather, I started 'from scratch'. This meant that I had to devise my own methodological pathway 'on the go'; one which would honour the commitment to doing politically-engaged research but which would define what 'being useful' would necessarily entail, in accordance with both my own, and the movement's, needs and predispositions.

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legendary, and my grandfather recalled many inspiring stories, such as taking part in solidarity action during the miners' strike of 1984-5. Clark's (2012) *The Labour Movement in Westmorland* chronicles both of their contributions.

#### 4.4.2 Selecting the Site

In addition to the rationale proffered in Chapter 1, the city of Liverpool was determined to be a relevant study site for a number of reasons. Meegan *et al.* (2014) argue that Liverpool provides a useful example of the different spatial impacts of the global economic crisis as subnational economies are affected by, and respond to, economic downturn in different ways. As the site of significant municipal retrenchment, and simultaneous observable private sector development, Liverpool is suitably placed to illustrate the various processes and actors shaping post-crisis cities, and to show how austerity urbanism is mediated through local politics (Chapter 5). The city also has a distinct political identity and set of histories, or an ‘exceptionalism’ (Belchem, 2006a), through which one might hypothesise that Liverpool will be a unique or effective site of anti-austerity resistance. This uniqueness offered potential for an analysis of the geographies of austerity urbanism, and for a nuanced examination of forms of actually existing anti-austerity contestation (Chapters 6 and 7). In contrast to traditional case study research, which remains hampered by issues of generalisability and representativeness, this thesis does not seek to draw out broader trends or lessons. Rather, it aims to show how a number of spatially extensive political and economic processes operates at a single local level, and promotes the lens of place as a key spatial framework to understand those processes. This thesis does not therefore define what universal anti-austerity politics is, or should be, but precisely the opposite; it intends to consider what it is about Liverpool that means these processes have more, or less, relevance than elsewhere. As a result, it examines how austerity can only be made sense of once contextualised within the particular histories, geographies and politics of a certain place. Davies (2009) has also warned that ethnography must look beyond territorially bounded sites and needs also to address the spatially extensive nature of contemporary political activity. Thus, although identifying Liverpool as an initial starting point, it was important not to demarcate the boundaries of ‘the field’ dogmatically prior to engagement, and I instead acknowledged the importance of engaging with the very spatialities and activities of the movement itself as far as feasibly possible (Martin, 2003). Liverpool did, thereafter, remain the primary site of engagement, but the research also involved travelling to other parts of Merseyside, as well as London.<sup>20</sup>

#### 4.4.3 Identifying Anti-Austerity Groups

I initially undertook a period of desk-based research in order to identify a number of anti-austerity organisations that were operative within the city. This included scoping local news reports (such as those contained within the *Liverpool Echo*) and grassroots activist websites

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<sup>20</sup> *People’s Assembly Against Austerity* ‘No More Austerity’ National Demonstration in London, field notes (23/06/14).

and blogs,<sup>21</sup> as well as social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter. I also possessed some existent contacts through my involvement in local struggles over the ‘bedroom tax’ during the previous year; through these earlier contacts I operated a snowball sampling approach (Bryman, 2008). This meant that the familiarity and trust gained with initial activists was used to establish contact with subsequent activists to the point that, over time, I became fully immersed in the movement. In conventional methodologies this approach is advocated in order to simply accumulate participants, but for this research the utilisation of this approach was necessary to establish the pre-requisite trust, solidarity and credentials which would allow me to be welcomed into the various anti-austerity campaigns and groups. To be accepted I needed to be recognised as being active in meetings and other forms of movement activity (see 4.4.4). In terms of the demographics of anti-austerity participants, the majority were typically aged between 40 and 65, predominantly but not exclusively male, from Liverpool, and self-identified as working-class.

Two initial problems had to be overcome. First, I had to consider which campaigns or groups could reasonably be defined as ‘anti-austerity’. For example, would the campaign to prevent Liverpool City Council’s sale of Sefton Park Meadows count? What about the Hillsborough Justice Campaign? Secondly, I had to scrutinise on what terms I would align with those groups where formal membership was a necessity for access e.g. political parties? Existing literature on activist ethnographies has tended to examine singular political campaigns or otherwise relatively homogeneous groups with high levels of ideological cohesion. Yet, anti-austerity seemed to envelop a range of heterogeneous and ideologically diverse groups, mostly with no formal membership whereby actors shifted across different campaigns and organisations in their activities. I resolved that many of these issues would have to be addressed within the field, but began with an initial definition which included any group of people forming an explicit critique of central or local government cuts, or else responding in contestation to the symptoms of those cuts (making at least some links to the politics of austerity). Since there was considerable overlap between the various individuals and groups involved (see *Table 4.1*), it later became clear who the dominant actors were in relation to anti-austerity politics in the city. In terms of access, I sought to engage with the broadest possible range of anti-austerity actors and discourse, but focused my participation around those groups that I either most identified with politically (two neighbourhood groups), or provided me with the greatest amount or quality of access. Thereafter, I was able to observe the convergence of these various groups through their participation in certain movement activities, and through my extensive involvement in *Liverpool against the Cuts* (LATC), a loose umbrella organisation in which

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<sup>21</sup> Such as Indymedia, LibCom and, locally, *Nerve Magazine*.

most organisations participated. *Table 4.1* broadly categorises these groups, and Chapter 6 explores their linkages in more detail.

Type of Organisation	Name of Group
Formal Political Parties	Socialist Party Socialist Workers Party Left Unity Green Party
Cross-Party Coalitions	Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC)
Trade Union Organisations	Unite the Union Unite CASA 567 Community Branch National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) Liverpool Trades Council
Neighbourhood Organisations	Old Swan against the Cuts Sefton Park Anti-Cuts South Liverpool Against Poverty Reclaim
Campaigns to Save Local Services	Libraries Sure Start children's centres Adult Social Care Mental health provision ( <i>Save our Sanity</i> ) Liverpool Women's Hospital
Other Political Organisations Contributing to 'Anti-Austerity'	Liverpool IWW Love Activists (anarchist direct action group) Liverpool against the Cuts (umbrella organisation) Merseyside People's Assembly Against Austerity (local branch of a national organisation) Momentum Merseyside Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network Unite Against Fascism
Other Political Campaigns Associated with 'Anti-Austerity'	No More Blacklisting Hillsborough Justice Campaign

**Table 4.1:** Observed Anti-Austerity Organisations in Liverpool (June 2014 – February 2016).<sup>22</sup>

#### 4.4.4 Conducting an Activist Ethnography

From June 2014 to February 2016, I undertook an activist ethnography with those anti-austerity groups in Liverpool. During this 21-month period, engagement was most intense from September 2014 to September 2015. This was due to the various activities and trajectories of the movement – such as a relatively significant campaign against the closure of eleven of the city's libraries, which coincided with the 2015 general and local elections – as well as the extent of access which I was afforded to the various groups. This meant that it took around three months to establish the necessary contacts and trust before I was considered, by

<sup>22</sup> Further information about these groups is provided in *Appendix A*. The 'other political campaigns' in the latter group were not created to oppose austerity explicitly, but did contribute to the anti-austerity milieu, hence their inclusion.

activists, to be a serious and credible player within the movement's politics.<sup>23</sup> I subsequently attended at least one 'event' every weekday as well as on most weekends and, in endeavouring to immerse myself as deeply as possible within the movement, I usually attended multiple events per day. Calendar clashes and the low level of political organisation<sup>24</sup> resulted in a difficulty arising by which I had to make political decisions about which events I would choose to participate in; this is further discussed in 4.5. My engagement consisted of attending meetings,<sup>25</sup> marches, rallies and demonstrations (*Figure 4.1*),<sup>26</sup> activist conferences, council meetings,<sup>27</sup> and various social activities,<sup>28</sup> as well as taking part in other movement activities such as leafleting and attending council-led service consultations. I also contributed via co-editing a movement pamphlet (*Figure 4.2; Appendix B*), and writing various campaign leaflets, agitprop and election material, in addition to maintaining a live conference Twitter stream (*Figure 4.3*),<sup>29</sup> and interacting with movement actors and groups on Facebook.

In February 2015, I co-organised a conference entitled 'No Austerity', which brought together activists from across different neighbourhood groups in order to encourage critical self-reflection about the movement's aims, strategies and tactics (*Figures 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, and 4.7*). This involved regular planning meetings for over two months and inviting guest speakers. The conference was attended by nearly one hundred activists. The collection of 'data' was in keeping with activist ethnographic approaches, and included recording extensive field notes, meeting minutes and compiling a reflexive research diary. I also kept a record of private communications and discussions. In addition, photographs were taken and an archive of movement literature, leaflets, letters, election material and other relevant documents was constructed (see section 4.4.6).

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<sup>23</sup> Private discussions with activists, field notes (12/01/15).

<sup>24</sup> As one activist noted, "We don't even have a calendar; you want to call a meeting in Liverpool, you have no idea whether somebody else will call a meeting on that date." Member of *LATC*, interview.

<sup>25</sup> Most groups met fortnightly or monthly, and in a variety of locations around the city, but typically in small, community halls. Jack Jones House (the UNITE building) and *The Casa* provided two hubs for anti-austerity activities.

<sup>26</sup> Local demonstrations were held predominantly against Liverpool City Council, and were therefore held at Liverpool Town Hall, but they also took place in the city centre area. I also attended the annual May Day and James Larkin marches, and took part in anti-fascist counter-demonstrations, in the city centre.

<sup>27</sup> Observing and asking questions of councillors in council meetings was a common movement tactic.

<sup>28</sup> This took place formally, such as in campaign fundraisers, but also included informal visits to the pub after most weekday meetings. For more information, see Chapter 7.

<sup>29</sup> Search for @noausterityliv and #noausterityliv on social networking website twitter.com.



**Figure 4.1:** Demonstration in Support of the National Union of Teachers' Strike, St George's Hall, Liverpool, 10 July 2014 (Source: Author).

### No Austerity

**Report from the  
No Austerity Conference  
14 February 2015  
Friends Meeting House,  
Liverpool**

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bambuser.com/v/5285137](http://bambuser.com/v/5285137)

### No Cuts, No Austerity

Our streets, Our services

**L**iverpool Against the Cuts invited everyone who wanted to fight the Con-Dem austerity policies and Labour's austerity plans, to join the "No Austerity" conference 14 February 2015 at the Friends Meeting House, School Lane, Liverpool.

The conference was initially a development of the community campaigns to save the 11 libraries in Liverpool that the City Council planned to close. It was a victorious campaign in that the libraries remain open, but there is a recognition that the future remains insecure whilst austerity blights our lives.

How did we succeed in the libraries struggle? It was important to respect the autonomy of the community campaigns and union struggles, this made it possible to work together to build a leadership and to make agreed joint actions.

The aim of the "No Austerity" conference was to bring activists and campaigning groups together and build on the existing struggles that are taking place in our communities, on the streets, and in our work places.

It was keenly attended by many aspects of this diverse movement, including: anti-bedroom tax campaigners; housing rights and welfare activists; disabled peoples' activists; trade unionists; students; representatives from leftist political parties and even those new to politics but equally conscious of the devastating effects of austerity policies.

We wanted to learn from each others' strategy and tactics and to develop a common programme on which we can fight in our campaigns and the elections, to end austerity that is destroying our communities and neighbourhoods and worsening all our lives.

In order to defeat austerity we need to build a mass opposition movement. To achieve this we need to raise awareness of existing struggles and raise the consciousness of what is possible.

This pamphlet cannot reflect the level of contributions made on the day but aims to reflect the diversity and number of campaigns and activists represented, and the feelings of hope and commitment that the day produced.

Reports from campaigns, practical workshops and open discussion all fed

### Thank You

**T**hank you to the union and community organisations who helped build this conference and make it happen - FBU Merseyside, UCU Liverpool university, UCU John Moores university, UCU Liverpool City College, Unite branches: Merseyside Finance NW11, NW 106 RLBHUT, NW 522.

We have to say thank you for the food - an amazing feast from Reclaim and their team of supporters from across Merseyside. Everyone expressed their genuine thanks for the enormous amount of fantastic work - keeping us satisfied and helping to make it a great day.

We sing the praises of and thank the musicians, in particular Phil Newton, for their renderings of Joe Hill, Bella Ciao and many other lively inspiring protest tunes.

The next step is 25 April 'March for No Austerity'. All are welcome - let's make a noise against austerity.

**Figure 4.2:** Excerpt from No Austerity Pamphlet (Source: Author). See Appendix B.

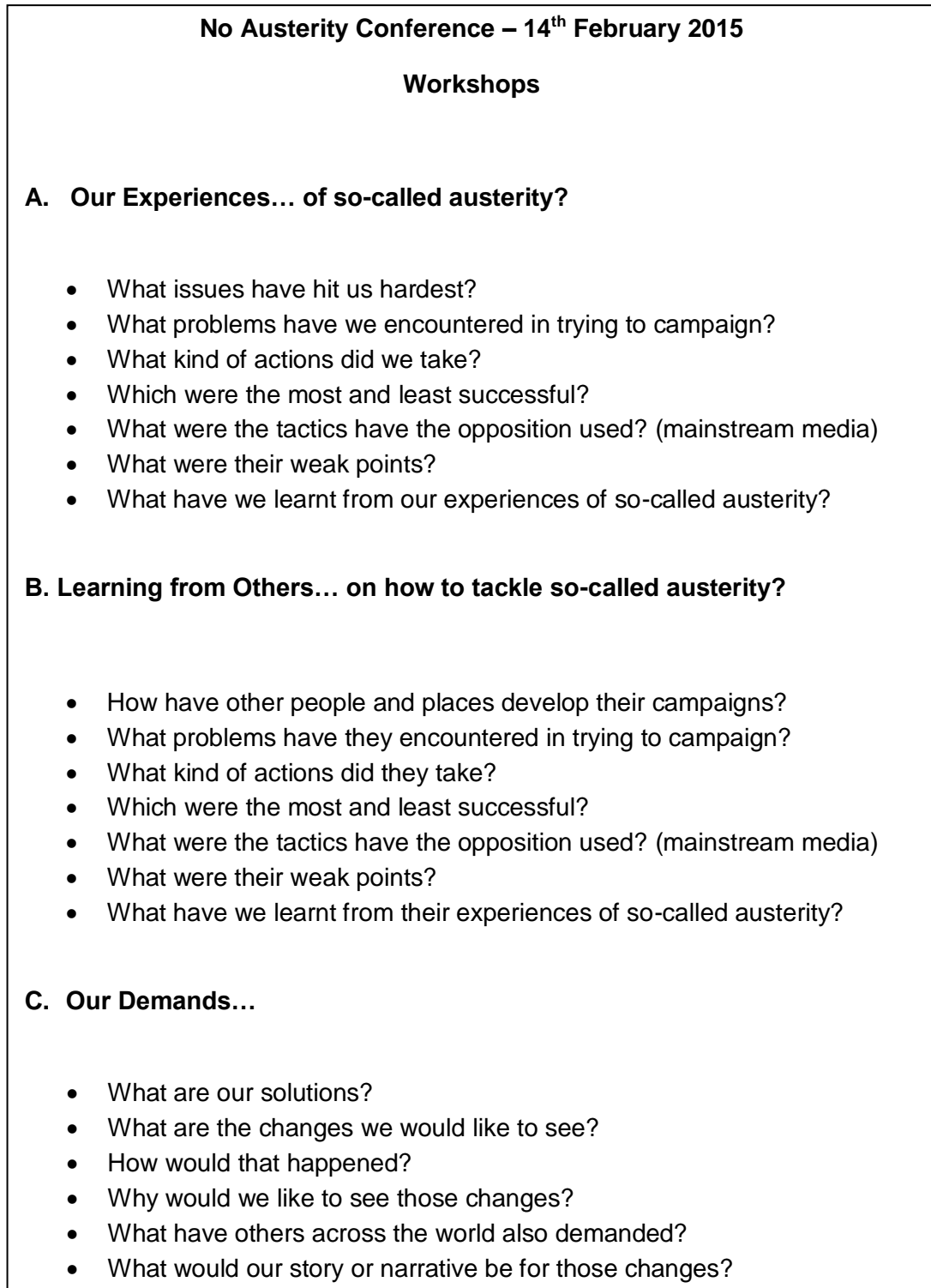




Figure 4.3: 'No Austerity LPL' Live Twitter Stream (Source: Author).



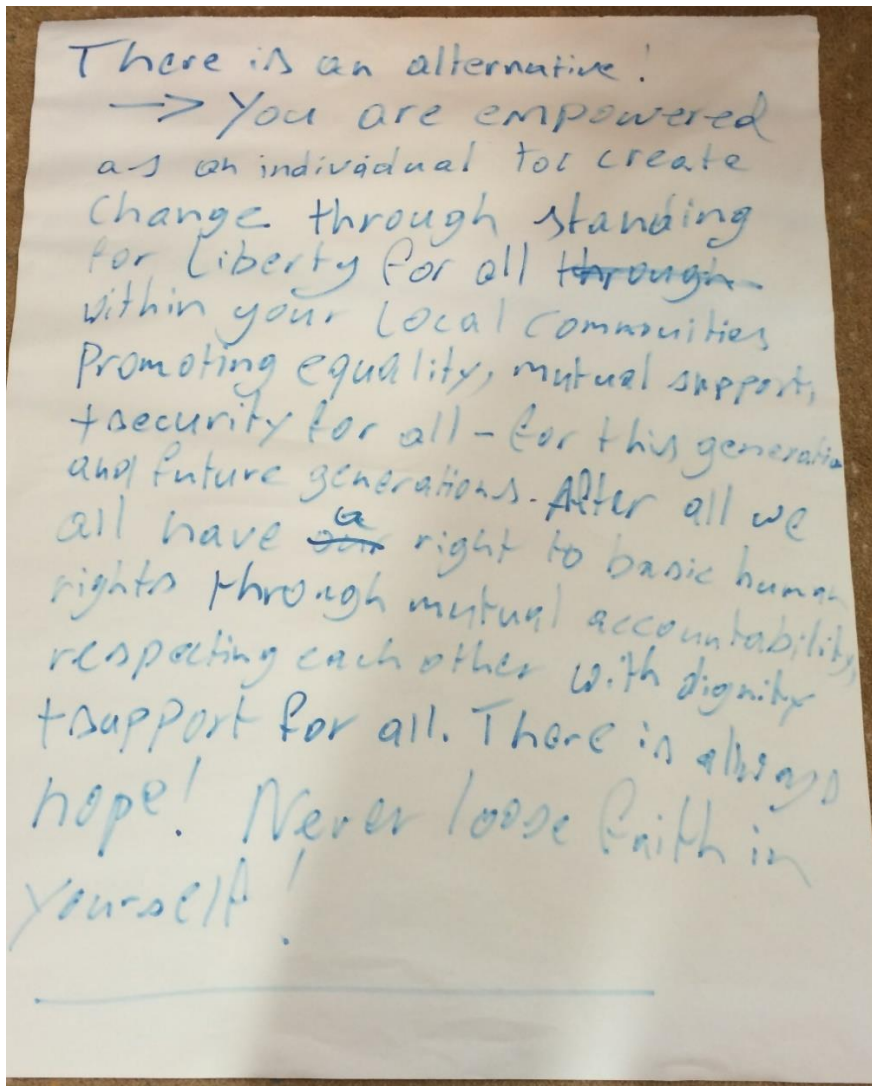
Figure 4.4: No Austerity Conference, 14 February 2015 (Source: Author).



**Figure 4.5:** No Austerity Conference, Workshop Structures (Source: No Austerity, 2015).



**Figure 4.6:** No Austerity Conference, Workshop B: Learning from Others (Source: Author).



**Figure 4.7:** No Austerity Conference, Workshop Output (Source: Author).

In delineating the boundaries of this ethnography, I could not generally attend meetings of formal political parties since membership was a prerequisite, although I was invited to some and did also attend public meetings, as well as conference sessions open to the general public, such as at the Left Unity (February 2015) and Green Party (March 2015) conferences. I did not participate in campaigns to which I was not politically sympathetic,<sup>30</sup> for to have done so would have contradicted the politically-engaged approach and would have meant that I was privileging the needs of the research over the commitment to behave reciprocally. I also did not attend meetings where access was for other reasons problematic.<sup>31</sup> The solution for those groups was to engage with them through LATC and to triangulate those observations with the findings gained from other methods. I reached higher levels of participation with some groups more than others, due to sharing a common political outlook and through having developed a certain rapport which allowed me to work across difference. My lived experience concurs with the growing body of literature which appends an analysis of *personality* to that of *positionality* (Moser, 2008; Wilkinson, 2016) in which interpersonal skills, mannerisms and the navigation of others' personalities can be crucial to building trust and shaping participants' judgement of the researcher. Access was also achieved through activist gatekeepers; that is, having other activists, particularly movement leaders, vouch for my credentials. I also developed a 'lay summary' (Madison, 2012), through which I explained what the research entailed, how I sought to work with the group(s), and what the research would contribute towards. In reality, most activists were uninterested and considered my research irrelevant to their struggle; instead, they were simply happy to have me involved, particularly as I was one of very few young activists. Despite running the risk of reaffirming the researcher-activist binary, it was important to gain the necessary informed consent and I therefore devised an informal mechanism in order to avoid reasserting those power imbalances.

As discussed in 4.4.3, I resolved to rationalise my approach and its emergent tensions in discussion with movement actors themselves and, where possible, the movement as a collective. In turn, I satisfied the claim to be undertaking politically-engaged research in a number of ways. First, I actively took sides and acted in solidarity with movement participants, with an explicit political commitment to further their various goals. This was not without

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<sup>30</sup> I therefore participated in the Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network rather than Unite Against Fascism, since these two groups approached anti-fascism from radically different perspectives. Moreover, following allegations of far-right sympathising within one neighbourhood group [anonymised] (see Chapter 6), I later withdrew my support for that group.

<sup>31</sup> It was felt appropriate that some campaigns which sought to defend particular services should be led by service-users themselves. These included the campaign to save mental health services, which was already led by service-users, and Sure Start children's centres, which predominantly involved a specific demographic, young mothers, whom my positionality did not easily facilitate interaction with. However, the libraries campaign included a broad demographic cross-section of society and as I identify as a library user, this campaign was more accessible.

problems, since there was no unified strategy or set of demands for ‘anti-austerity’, and the groups constituted a diverse and often fractious network (discussed in Chapter 6). However, engaging with the different campaigns and organisations *on their terms* allowed me to ensure reciprocity by providing the tangible returns they desired, such as accessing my writing skills. Secondly, I contributed to the strengthening of the movement through seeking to emancipate movement actors by assisting them with their attempts to raise consciousness within their various communities (e.g. through leafleting). Thirdly, my engagement allowed me to balance my commitment to pursue tangible research objectives whilst also facilitating rigorous and critical social inquiry amongst anti-austerity actors. I therefore critically shifted movement discourse forward, although I recognised that the primary feedback mechanism for this would occur through my practicing of anti-austerity politics within the milieu, rather than through the production of any scholarly output. This was further intensified by the substantial time lag between engagement and thesis publication; the political landscape has already substantially altered – such as through the emergence of Momentum – and the resulting problematics have either shifted, dissolved, or been resolved. It is difficult to measure what precise impact this research has had, although many activists reflected upon the strategic (during periods of critical self-reflection) and cathartic (during interviews) benefits that this inquiry brought them.

The importance of this should not be understated since activism can suffer long periods of hopelessness and defeatism, and can also be physically and mentally exhausting, leading to burn-out (Brown and Pickerill, 2009). As some activists reported, ‘being useful’ can be simply knowing that you are on their side. Thus, rather than necessarily seeking to attain some grand transformation – which is predetermined to fail given the prevailing power relations that exist between the conflicting political forces – or exclusively privileging capital A activism, an alternative measure for this research is the extent to which it exploited cracks within the neoliberal university. Without seeking to privilege or overstate the significance of academic involvement within anti-austerity politics, the very notion that I opted to pursue this form of politically-engaged research, at the expense of other, less socially just, forms of inquiry was, in itself, an empowering notion for some activists. I was also able to contribute by providing institutional resources, such as free printing, and the time spent doing research, in ways which simultaneously posed me as an activist yet, when it suited participants otherwise, also as an asset.

In terms of assisting critical self-reflection, I took inspiration from previous executions of Touraine’s Sociological Intervention (see Cousin and Rui, 2011; North, 1998) where focus groups were utilised to provide provocative alternative analyses to movement actors. That said, I applied this technique within a less artificial environment through deploying an activist

ethnographic approach. Through this, I sought to challenge certain anti-austerity theorisations and strategies critically through my own political engagement. This required careful consideration and application in order to avoid posing myself as an expert on the topic, which would reinforce the intellectual-activist binary. I therefore mobilised existing critiques which were at least partially familiar to actors within the movement – such as those expressed by minority movement voices, or by Liverpool City Council (LCC) – in ways which were comparable to that of playing ‘devil’s advocate’. This allowed me to be framed as a ‘committed but critical’ movement participant who was concerned with generating more effective forms of anti-austerity resistance; it was an approach that was well-received in one-to-one exchanges with activists, some of whom acknowledged that their perspective had been challenged. Where this did not occur, activists were at least asked to reflect critically upon their argumentation. Moreover, in reserving a precise definition of the methodology until I was fully situated within the field, I could observe that anti-austerity politics in the city were popularly framed by two dominant – yet competing – perspectives; those of LCC, and the combined voice of grassroots anti-austerity actors. This framing further lent itself to the provocative ‘devil’s advocate’ ethnographic approach, which involved relaying the council’s perspectives – as heard in the local media, council meetings, and other engagements with the municipal authority such as service consultations – and inviting activists to deconstruct this argumentation in critical ways. Many activists were appreciative of this method and stated that it had reshaped their political outlook. Finally, I was also cautious to avoid framing these interventions in academic terms or language, which would have again reinforced the notion of the researcher as the objective intellectual onlooker, and the participants as incapable of such judgements. However, this technique still depended upon obtaining a high degree of trust and solidarity from movement participants, and was applied most effectively in the latter stages of the ethnography.

The resulting presentation of the empirical data should therefore be read as: deconstructing LCC’s argumentation (Chapter 5); identifying which issues arose from the grassroots, and how the movement could be made stronger (Chapter 6); and whether the organic framing of anti-austerity politics within a Liverpoolian political identity presents particular possibilities or limits (Chapter 7). Importantly, these are research themes that emerged from within my engagement, rather than beginning as a set of hypotheses which then needed to be tested, i.e. that which is generally referred to as ‘grounded theory’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1968).

#### *4.4.5 Interviews as Conversations*

In addition to adopting an activist ethnography, 26 interviews were conducted with members of anti-austerity groups in Liverpool. These interviews took place during September and

October 2015 following the most intensive phase of ethnographic engagement, and during the period in which the greatest degree of trust, familiarity and comradeship had been developed. In line with feminist methodologies, interviews should be understood not as natural occurrences that relay objective data, but as constructed performances between unequal and differently positioned individuals, where the researcher defines and controls the situation (Riessman, 1993). The purpose of developing prior trust was not, therefore, merely to achieve better data, but constituted a deliberate attempt to dissolve power differentials between the activists and me. In order to make the interviews consistent with a commitment to conducting politically-engaged research from within, I designed the interviews to be ‘as conversations’ (North, 2011b). This involved embarking upon enquiry of some pre-determined topics using open-ended questions and a conversational style, in which I forwarded my own thoughts framed within the first-person ‘we’ rather than the second-person ‘you’. This constituted a significant difference to traditional forms of semi-structured interview (Silverman, 2011), and acknowledged my own implication within the movement’s activities. I determined that, to complement the goals of the research, the conversations must contribute towards ‘our’ critical self-reflection of what anti-austerity politics had so far achieved, what the possibilities and limits were, and what anti-austerity politics should do next.

While some militant research accounts have hesitated over the appropriateness of conducting interviews due to their perceived reinforcement of power imbalances (Russell, 2015), I believed that interviews as conversations could provide both an effective movement resource and research method given the specifics of anti-austerity praxis in Liverpool. Since meetings and other political activities were usually predicated on procedural issues rather than strategic concerns, one-to-one discussions allowed ‘us’ to critically reflect on the movement’s aims, strategies, tactics and discourses as well as to (in)validate the ethnographic observations that I had made, and additionally permitted participants to make sense of their own experiences.<sup>32</sup> They also allowed respondents to raise important issues which may not have been anticipated by the researcher (Silverman, 2011). While the previously mentioned ‘Sociological Intervention’ (Touraine, 1981; North, 1998) conducts movement self-reflection within a focus group setting, such methods can be particularly difficult to organise, whereas one-to-one interviews are less intrusive upon activists’ time. Besides, opportunities for collective critical inquiry were already presented during pub visits and other informal activities, whereas interviews as conversations allowed me to dig deeper into the often complex and fraught

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<sup>32</sup> Many interview participants described the strategic, cathartic or other benefits that they gained from these conversations. In particular, discussing participants’ political histories allowed them to locate their own political identities and reminded them why they took part in anti-austerity activism. For some, especially during periods of hopelessness and defeatism, this was particularly refreshing, field notes (various).



movement histories, since, under anonymity, individuals were more likely to reveal potentially sensitive information. This also allowed me to reveal less dominant voices from across the political milieu; this militated against letting movement leaders overshadow the data (Bernard, 2012).

In terms of sampling, I decided not to exclude any particular group or individual purposely, but began with those with whom I was most familiar. This allowed me to refine my conversational interview technique; these first interviewees thus acted as gatekeepers in vouching for the benefits of interview participation. I invited these individuals privately, whilst I also circulated invitations over email lists so that any individual who expressly wished to be interviewed could do so (see *Appendix C*). Finally, I approached certain individuals face-to-face in order to further encourage their participation, such as prominent movement voices and/or leaders. I concluded the interviews once data and participant saturation was reached. The former refers to a state of “thematic exhaustion” within the data set (Guest *et al.*, 2006: 65), while the latter suggests that all participants had been approached. The nature of anti-austerity political organisation in Liverpool means that determining precisely who is in/out of the milieu is decidedly difficult, particularly when, through snowball sampling, I was later encouraged to contact a myriad of individuals who were historically politically active in the city, some of whom have, unfortunately, died during the process of this research. Remembering that the research is primarily focused upon contemporary anti-austerity politics, rather than sketching a genealogy of the entire political history of Liverpool (for this, see Davies, 1996), I approached all possible participants and interviewed all those that time constraints allowed for. Simultaneously, when triangulated with the range of methods deployed, data saturation was reached.

I interviewed individuals from across the different groups that are noted in *Table 4.1* to garner a range of perspectives, in particular targeting those individuals or groups to which I had limited access during the ethnographic phase of the research process. Interviews took place in a range of locations across Liverpool at the convenience of participants, including their homes, cafés and pubs, as well as in public and activist spaces, such as libraries, community halls, and trade union buildings. The role of place is increasingly understood as significant to the research encounter (Holton and Riley, 2014; Riley, 2010; Valentine, 1997). First, there are practical issues to consider, such as ensuring adequate privacy for participants, and the reduction of noise and interference which breaks the flow of the interview and makes transcription particularly difficult. However, talking to people in their ‘own territory’, or at least one where they feel comfortable, can facilitate the building of rapport. Interviews lasted between one and two hours, and were recorded with a Dictaphone, before being transcribed (immediately when possible). I also annotated the resultant transcriptions with extensive reflections which took



note of the interview surroundings, and the prevailing atmosphere, mood and interview dynamic, as well as non-verbal interactions, in order to provide a “rich, detailed and multi-layered” (Silverman, 1993: 15) account of the exchange. After analysing and identifying themes which emerged during the ethnography, an interview guide was prepared with broadly defined questions to address those themes (see *Appendix D*). This included i) personal political biographies, ii) definitions and analysis of austerity, iii) challenges and provocations to anti-austerity, and iv) reflections on ‘our’ anti-austerity activism to date. In accordance with the conversational interview approach, ‘probes’ were used to further stimulate discussion and to explore the complexities and contradictions of participants’ accounts (Bryman, 2008). Participants were invited to deviate from these themes, and I utilised a series of provocations in order to encourage critical self-reflection, for example:

*Interviewer:* Listen to [Mayor] Anderson, and he talks about how anti-cuts campaigns’ only solution is to set an illegal budget. It didn’t work in the 1980s, when there was massive trade union support and anti-Thatcher feeling across the country. Nowadays, a much more viable strategy is ‘Invest to Earn’; encourage the private-sector to come and invest in the city, that’ll reduce the burden on the council and plug some of the [funding] shortfall. Councils all over the UK are doing it. We need a ‘dented shield’ to protect Liverpool’s best interests. [Anti-cuts] campaigners are stuck in the past, and we need to get with the times. That’s what [Anderson] is telling us, but even Derek Hatton says that it won’t work now. How should we respond to this? In Liverpool against the Cuts, are we missing something?

Finally, interview transcripts must be interpreted in the process of data analysis (Silverman, 2011). In order to avoid misrepresenting participants’ views, I returned the transcripts to participants with annotations and invited them to further elaborate upon particular details, while respondents were also able to delete any passages of the transcript with which they were uncomfortable. In keeping with standard ethics procedures (discussed in 4.4.9), participation was voluntary, data was kept confidential, and participants could withdraw their transcripts at any time without penalty. Finally, a standpoint decision was made to privilege the voices of activists over my own. To this end, I have provided extended interview excerpts within the empirical chapters, at the expense of ethnographic reflections, although notes of ethnographic observations can be found in the footnotes and are used to support the other data.

#### *4.4.6 Elite Interviews*

I also interviewed nine councillors from Liverpool City Council who together represented the three main political parties operating within the city; Labour, Green and the Liberal Democrats (see *Table 4.2*), and the chief executive of a third sector organisation, Alt Valley Community Trust. These ‘elite interviews’ – where elite is distinguished as an individual with the “ability to exert influence through social networks, social capital and strategic position within social

structures” (Harvey, 2011: 433) – should be viewed as compatible and complementary to a politically-engaged research strategy, rather than an affront to it. Recent research stresses the importance of local elites in mediating austerity urbanism (Fuller and West, 2017; Peck, 2017a), and a fuller discussion of these aspects is offered in Chapter 5. North *et al.* (2017) also reflect on the productive potential of forming alliances with sympathetic local policy-makers in Liverpool, and, while anti-austerity participants were generally sceptical of building such relationships (Chapter 6), as a critically engaged ethnographer committed to the politics of partisan knowledge production, it was imperative for me to remain open-minded and to interrogate the possibilities for alliance-building.

Name	Party	Title
Cllr Jane Corbett	Labour	Cabinet Member – Social Inclusion, Fairness & Equalities
Cllr Roz Gladden	Labour	Cabinet Member – Adult & Children’s Social Care and Health (now Deputy Lord Mayor)
Cllr Frank Hont	Labour	Cabinet Member – Housing
Cllr Barry Kushner	Labour	Cabinet Member – Children’s Services
Cllr Gary Millar	Labour	Mayoral Lead for Business & International Trade
Cllr Steve Munby	Labour	Cabinet Member – Neighbourhoods
Cllr Nick Small	Labour	Assistant Mayor of Liverpool; Cabinet Member – Education, Employment & Skills
Cllr Tom Crone	Green	Leader – Green Party Group
Cllr Richard Kemp	Liberal Democrat	Leader – Liberal Democrat Party Group
Phil Knibb		Chief Executive, Alt Valley Community Trust

**Table 4.2:** Semi-Structured Interviews Conducted with Liverpool City Council and Third-Sector Organisations (November 2015).

In order to synchronise these elite interviews with the values of committed politically-engaged research, I designed the interviews so that they represented the largely silenced voices of anti-austerity participants (Chapter 5). Accordingly, I interviewed councillors only after conducting both the activist ethnography and conversational interviews; this provided me with sufficient time to prepare both a suitable defence (of anti-austerity groups attacked by the council) and offence (attempting to deconstruct elite discourses of austerity and anti-austerity). These stances were then presented to the councillors during their interviews. This design was prepared in discussion with activists both collectively, during informal conversations, and in the conversational interviews, which concluded by asking:

*Interviewer:* I am soon to approach councillors representing Liverpool City Council. I intend to provide a voice for the movement, is there anything you’d like me to ask or say?

However, by the time the elite interviews took place in November 2015, my positionality had shifted, as I had become more sympathetic to the challenges posed to local government under

austerity urbanism, and, in turn, the decision-making pressures that councillors faced. I had also grown increasingly frustrated with those grassroots anti-austerity groups which generally refused to build alliances with the council, and more critical of the (lack of) credible political alternatives that had emerged during the period of activist ethnography (a further discussion is drawn out in 4.5). However, this was not a disadvantage *per se*. The literature on interviewing elites variously identifies gaining access and trust, positionality, negotiating power inequalities, and the importance of researching the participant as key challenges when conducting such research (Cochrane, 1998; McDowell, 1998; Mikecz, 2012; Schoenberger, 1991). Taking a wholly antagonistic approach would not have been conducive to gaining access and trust, facilitating rapport, or negotiating power inequalities. Assuming a changed position that could now be defined as still sympathetic to the politics of grassroots anti-austerity, yet critical and open-minded of the different ways in which austerity could be managed, forged further opportunities within the elite interviews. This revised positionality allowed me to perform a role that was serious, critical and provocative, yet respectful, balanced and open-minded, and I was able to gain instant trust and credibility from local elites, and renegotiate those power imbalances that had not initially been in my favour.<sup>33</sup> In line with the literature, I benefitted from ‘doing my homework’ (Mikecz, 2012). This required me to familiarise myself with the councillors’ backgrounds, precise remits and political perspectives, and explain specifically why I had targeted them for interview.<sup>34</sup> While at risk of perpetuating another binary, that of the detached and objective expertise of elites versus the irrational and unknowing outbursts of activists (Haughton *et al.*, 2016), I deliberately chose to dress in formal wear in order to attain credibility and to ‘blend in’ to my surroundings. The rationale was that the ends justify the means; convincing elites to take me seriously would provide the opportunity to deconstruct their argumentation, and give weight to the provocation of alternative analyses. Interviews lasted one hour to ninety minutes, and were recorded and transcribed in the manner previously outlined, and the same ethical guidelines were applied. Most interviews took place in the ‘official’ and private locations of Liverpool Town Hall and the Cunard Building, where council offices are located and municipal activity takes place; a small minority of interviews were sited in cafés and councillors’ homes.

Following ongoing analysis of the ethnographic fieldwork and activist interviews, I identified a series of emergent themes which were addressed through the broad questions asked of the councillors (see *Appendix E*). These were i) personal political biographies, ii) how the cuts

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<sup>33</sup> The fact that councillors voluntarily decided to tell me many things ‘off tape’ confirms this, field notes (28/11/15).

<sup>34</sup> On discussing the future of the Labour Party, for example, I commented that I knew that the interviewee, Assistant Mayor of Liverpool, Cllr Nick Small, had voted for leadership candidate Liz Kendall. Impressed, he replied, ““Oh, you’ve done your research there!” (interview).

should be managed nationally and locally, iii) how the council should relate to anti-austerity groups and the third sector, and iv) what is the potential for alternatives to austerity at different scales? These took the form of semi-structured interviews with provocations, such as:

*Interviewer:* The council talks about attracting the private-sector, and the success of the visitor economy, but at the same time we're seeing the proliferation of zero-hours contracts and increasing inequality. Parts of Liverpool seem to be getting left behind. So how do we build a local economy that is inclusive of everyone? And what is the council's responsibility for that?

In terms of sampling, on researching elites, it has been suggested that researchers should attempt to pursue as many different avenues as possible in a polite, yet persistent and opportunistic manner (Yeung, 1995). Following Yeung's advice, I contacted a range of councillors, who represented a wide variety of political perspectives and roles, via email (see *Appendix F*). This approach was partially successful, but the snowball sampling proved more effective; each Labour councillor recommended me to another, again exemplifying the level of respect I had earned. Councillors' PAs can also be important gatekeepers (Harvey, 2011), and developing rapport with them eased the speed of communications considerably. I chose not to exclude any councillors specifically, but was also mindful to target the key decision-makers, and I resultantly interviewed six of nine Cabinet Members.<sup>35</sup> I concluded the interviews once participant saturation had been reached, where each perspective and remit was adequately captured, and no further interview replies were forthcoming. Having accessed two-thirds of the decision-making body, and triangulated the findings with those that emerged from other methods, a state of data saturation was deemed to have been reached.

#### *4.4.7 Content Analysis*

Content analysis can be defined as a research method for the "subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1278). This approach allows the researcher to classify large amounts of text into an efficient number of categories that share similar meanings. Rather than use preconceived categories, I allowed the categories to emerge from my immersion within the data. This allowed new insights or meanings to develop (Kondracki *et al.*, 2002). In addition to the data collected through ethnographic observations and interactions, and through informal conversational feedback which allowed me to confirm, modify or reject these observations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), I deployed content analysis to capture the secondary data that remained. Specifically, this included that which

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<sup>35</sup> The Cabinet comprises the Mayor of Liverpool and nine Cabinet Members, who are elected councillors chosen to hold executive positions by the Mayor. Each has the remit of a defined service. These include, for example, housing, neighbourhoods, and children's services.

was produced by relevant anti-austerity individuals or groups for purposes other than the research, but which nevertheless still carried significance. This included data produced in written form but also other sources, such as radio and television shows, which were transcribed and supplied to the archive. This data is categorised and themed in *Table 4.3*. The numbers are used to illustrate the different types of sources, but do not bear any thematic significance.

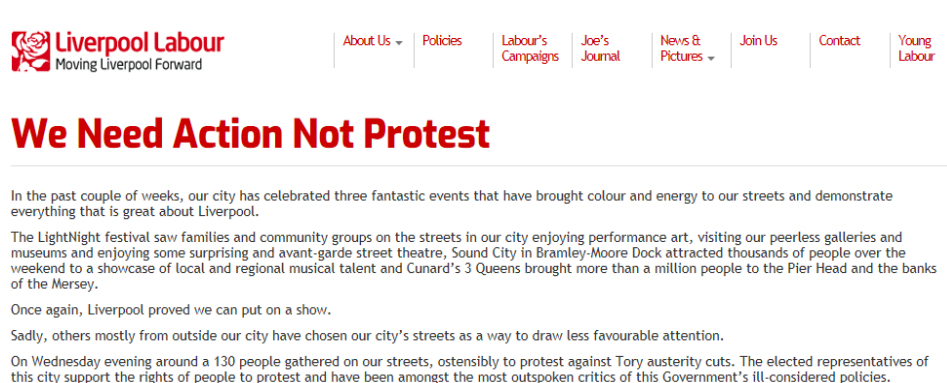
In total, I analysed 431 unique documents (see *Figures 4.8, 4.9 and 4.10*) and 512 forms of private correspondence, as well as over 300 photographs taken by other activists and me, all collected throughout the 21 months of ethnographic engagement. The sample was identified to include all possible forms of data which I had encountered, observed, handled, and personally produced during the course of the research. I signed up to email lists to receive relevant correspondence from activists, and kept note of all personal correspondence. The latter were only analysed with permission from the senders. Through an inductive approach, the sample included all forms of ‘data’ that I had encountered during the course of practicing anti-austerity politics in Liverpool, rather than actively searching for, and collecting, material beyond this context. While the way these materials are crafted – particularly for ‘official’ or elite-published sources – often reveals more than the actual document itself (Krippendorff, 2004), this three-pronged methodological approach allowed me to capture the full possible range, and most significant elements, of austerity and anti-austerity politics in Liverpool.

Source	No.	Source Type
Activist	1	Meeting minutes, agendas, motions and other relevant documents
	2	Leaflets, petitions, election materials, banners, placards
	3	Movement magazines, reports, articles, newsletters, radio shows
	4	Collectively produced material e.g. conference workshops
	5	Independent magazines e.g. <i>Nerve Magazine</i>
	6	Private correspondence, email lists
	7	Social media material (Facebook, Twitter), photographs
	8	Anti-austerity organisation constitutions
LCC	1	Meeting minutes, agendas, motions, questions submitted to LCC
	2	Website, public statements, Hansard
	3	Public and private correspondence from councillors
	4	Correspondence to residents e.g. council tax leaflet, Twitter
	5	TV shows e.g. BBC Panorama on <i>Healthy Liverpool</i>
Labour Party	1	Articles, web blogs, election materials, public statements
Other Parties	1	Articles, web blogs, election materials, public statements
Local Media	1	News reports

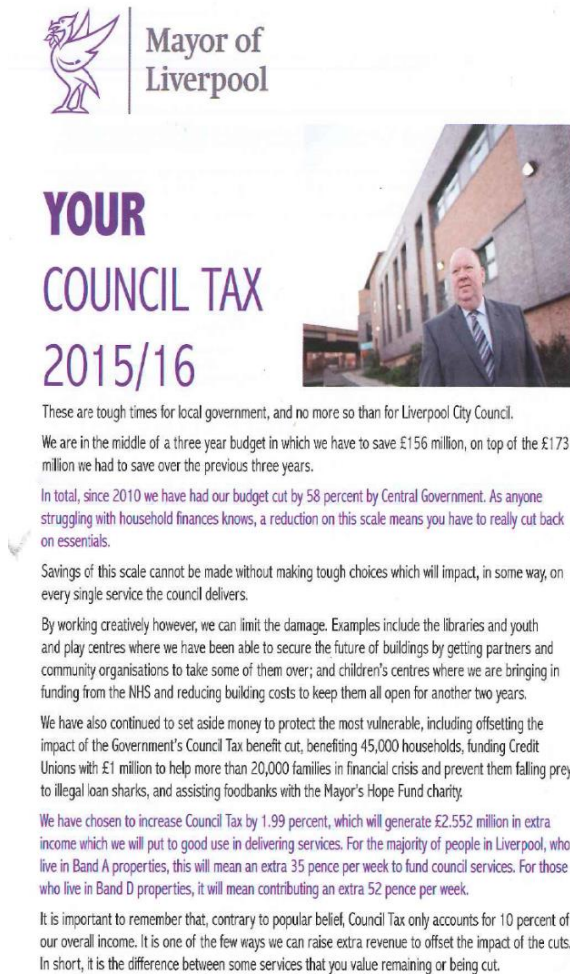
**Table 4.3:** Categorisation of Data Collected for Content Analysis (June 2014 – February 2016).



**Figure 4.8:** Leaflet: 'Libraries Saved!', n.d. (Source: Liverpool against the Cuts, 2014).



**Figure 4.9:** Website: 'We Need Action Not Protest', 31 May 2015 (Source: Liverpool Labour, 2015).



**Figure 4.10:** Council Tax Leaflet, n.d. (Source: Liverpool City Council, 2015a).

#### 4.4.8 Data Analysis

In politically-engaged research, 'data analysis' is not a distinct stage involving detached analysis of objective data, but instead represents a process of conscious and constant reflection upon movement aims, strategies, tactics and discourses as part of a collective iterative process of movement-building. The 'analysis' of data thus had two distinct phases. The first phase was characterised through movement-building itself, conducted through 21 months of ethnographic engagement, where the identification of political possibilities and limitations was considered with movement participants and actively acted upon, and through the conversational interviews, where emerging themes were identified and deconstructed with activists. This represented a departure from conventional forms of qualitative research which seek to extract data from the field and return to the university to analyse it from a detached vantage point. The three distinct methods also allowed for triangulation of the data. The second phase involved analysing all data gathered, including reflections from the first phase of the analysis, and searching for emergent themes. I opted against the use of data analysis software,

such as NVivo, in favour of achieving a closer familiarity with the richness of the data (Wilkinson, 2016). Analysis therefore involved constant re-reading of the interview transcripts, field notes, research diary and other sources, and thereafter coding the data manually. I drew upon a thematic analysis which allowed themes to emerge naturally from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006), but I also included my constant reflections from the first phase of data analysis. Broad codes were first identified and then refined into sub-codes to allow me to make sense of the volume of data. This process continued until all forms of data were analysed.

#### *4.4.9 Ethical Considerations*

The research methodology qualified under expedited review of the University of Liverpool, School of Environmental Sciences, Research Ethics Committee (Ref. No: 047). Guidance was also sought from the ESRC Research Ethics Framework (2015). For interviews, this required gaining the informed consent of all participants (see *Appendix G*) and an information sheet was provided (see *Appendix H*). For ethnography, I made my presence as a researcher fully overt and gained the necessary verbal consents. I later followed the principle of ‘implied consent’ for occasions when gaining written or verbal consent was impractical, such as when participating within public demonstrations. This is an acceptable approach because it follows that, when people are acting within the public domain, they would fully expect their behaviour to be observed by all those present. I otherwise ensured that the research respected conventional ethical procedures such as the right to withdraw without disadvantage, confidentiality of results, and anonymity.

The question of institutional ethics has been much critiqued from the standpoint of participatory and militant research due to its rigid, un-reflexive, and objective nature (Gillan and Pickerill, 2012; Halvorsen, 2015; Procter, 1998). Such principles often stand in contradiction to the commitments of politically-engaged or militant research, where a researcher’s ethics are instead guided by one’s positionality within a movement. I therefore resolved that these approaches could somewhat be combined and thus, in addition to institutional requirements, I followed a ‘relational ethics of struggle’ (Routledge, 2009). This means that my ethics were framed according to my commitment to the movement (broadly conceived) and individuals within it. In practice, this meant following the various ‘codes of conduct’ that bound the movement together (i.e. mutual respect, excluding discriminatory voices, subscribing to the safe space policy), and implementing an informal feedback mechanism through which I invited activists to critique the process and mechanisms of the research. I have also sought to accomplish a critique from within anti-austerity politics in Liverpool, but have tried to steer clear of producing content which might serve to undermine



the movement, or be weaponised by oppositional forces (Koopman, 2015). Finally, while an ethics of reciprocity is no complete remedy to the various power imbalances associated with academic research (Gillan and Pickerill, 2012; Taylor, 2015), I offered what I could, regardless of how limited that contribution might have been. In addition, this research supports the recent calls of geographers engaged with social movements for the development and adoption of an alternative form of ethics more suited to negotiating the complex and ongoing dilemmas that politically-engaged researchers face (AGC, 2010; Halvorsen, 2015, Russell, 2015).

#### *4.4.10 Presentation of the Research*

In the following chapters, the reader should take note of the following. First, the majority of activists have been anonymised, although reference to their group or organisation has usually remained. In some instances, certain activists are not anonymised; this decision was taken with their permission, and their inclusion intends to portray the historical continuities of political activism within Liverpool, where key actors – in particular from the Militant struggle – remain central to the shaping of oppositional political discourse (discussed in Chapter 6). Examples include former Militant members Tony Mulhearn and Felicity Dowling, who were both later active in Liverpool against the Cuts (hereafter LATC). In addition to the noteworthiness of their voices, it may be that their name is of real significance to the specific claim that is being made, or they have otherwise appeared identifiable in any case. Therefore, while the anonymisation of activists may not at first appear entirely consistent, the intention is, on the one hand, to respect participants' right to anonymity yet, on the other, to reflect the dominance of particular voices within the movement itself. With the requisite ethical clearance from those latter participants, this could be achieved. Generally, specific groups or organisations have not, however, been anonymised in order to illustrate the distance between the different groups, although on some occasions – such as those demonstrating conflict – organisations have also been anonymised. This decision was taken to protect the identity or reputation of that particular group. Herein, the reader should note that while respondents' views may often be characteristic of the overall views or practices of a particular organisation – hence the very use of the quotation – the respondent does not represent *the* voice of that organisation itself.

In line with standard ethical practice, city councillors were offered anonymity. However, none requested this, and I therefore sought to include their voices in the publication of the research with their permission. This reflects a standpoint decision which chose not to anonymise councillors due to their relative position of power, and their overall responsibility as elected local authority representatives to be held accountable to local residents. In assuming public office, councillors could be conceived as having a civic duty to publically explain decisions made in office in order to be answerable to the local citizenry, whose interests they are elected

to represent. In line with 4.4.6, adopting a stance which was critical yet open-minded introduced certain avenues for discussion which may in turn have opened up renewed political debate for activists (and other onlookers to these issues), reflecting the standpoint decision which had informed the research throughout. Through discussions with activists, it became clear that being able to identify political differences between certain councillors would be potentially empowering and strategically effective in carving open space for more targeted critique, exposing contradictions in the council's approach, and informing the movement with whom productive alliances might be feasibly built. For the thesis, the identification of different councillors thus enabled the research to expose the various political perspectives that occur within a party, rather than to represent it as a homogeneous bloc. Finally, during interviews, councillors would often self-censor by requesting to talk 'off the record' when seeking to share confidential or potentially sensitive or controversial information. This all helped to ensure that what is published in the thesis hereafter can ultimately fulfil the dual intention of being both politically productive for activists yet ethically sensitive to all participants in the research.

A second standpoint decision was to report participants' responses *verbatim*, and to capture the distinct scouse accent, thereby staying true to the self-identification of the participants and aiding the trustworthiness and credibility of the results obtained (Corden and Sainsbury, 2005). The accent is the most defining aspect of the scouse identity (Boland, 2008), and the inclusion of the scouse vernacular therefore reflected an attempt to privilege those working-class identities and challenge negative stereotypes attached to the accent. Thirdly, the reader will observe extensive use of footnotes within the empirical chapters. The data is presented in this way in order for it to be adequately contextualised, to convey the richness of the data set, and to illustrate the multiple sources from which data was gathered. The reader should refer to these footnotes to observe the various data sources.

## **4.5 Lessons from Politically-Engaged Research**

This chapter closes with a reflection upon the challenges and methodological advances made during the course of this research; this will allow scholar-activists to sharpen their tools in advance of future political engagement. The section proceeds as follows: 4.5.1 addresses issues concerning positionality and reflexivity, 4.5.2 examines the affective and embodied experience of conducting an activist ethnography, and 4.5.3 explores the dilemmas of working on and across the complex terrain of social movements.

### *4.5.1 Positionality and Reflexivity*

Having already discussed the importance of reflexively interrogating one's positionality, it is also pertinent to recognise that positionalities are neither singular nor static, but multiple, fluid, and shifting throughout a research process. In the context of activist ethnographies – which

are long-term and require the researcher to make an explicit political commitment – the researcher's positionalities must be constantly negotiated. I began as a relative 'outsider' for around three months, having positioned myself as a critical and politically-engaged researcher who was on the side of grassroots anti-austerity struggles. Being relatively new to the (far-)left political milieu in Liverpool, I was initially unfamiliar with certain implicit subcultural rules and codes, such as the types of language, acronyms and references used, and the ways in which formal meetings are conducted, as well as the local context, which was ridden with old political and personal disputes playing out in new forms.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, this 'outsider' status could be resolved. Meegan (1989) describes a long history of suspicion and hostility towards outsiders in the city – particularly agents of the state but also academics – due to their external coverage of the city in the 1970s and 1980s. The label for people from the surrounding areas of Liverpool, 'woollyback' or 'wool', also has negative connotations associated with it (Boland, 2010), and, in certain contexts, having a 'wool' sounding accent is sufficient to derive immediate suspicion as to one's attitudes or motives.<sup>37</sup> Kilfoyle (2000) also observed that out-of-town Militant supporters would affect a scouse accent in order to gain credibility within the city's far-left political milieu. While patently not a scouser, and aware of being labelled a 'wool', I was keen to emphasise both my working class identity and my avid affiliation to the city in order to quell any fears or suspicion that might have arisen as a consequence of my initial outsider status. While a shared identity could not be taken for granted, I was later accepted by some activists as an 'honorary scouser', a term reserved for non-natives who align themselves with the distinct political and/or cultural identity of the city (Boland, 2010). However, one also needs to be well-versed on the local political context to be accepted as a credible political actor, rather than merely an observer or, worse, an academic hindrance. Most activists had long histories of political activism in the city, often stretching back for generations (see Chapter 7), and one needed to have a strong grasp of the place-based specificities of the city's politics in order to be 'accepted' into the movement. The first three months were a steep learning curve, but spending one year familiarising myself with these histories was also hugely beneficial.

While positionalities must therefore be mobilised, they are not always in the control of the researcher. The way I became positioned by activists over the long-term also changed. This was as a result of my having 'proved myself' through participation within the movement milieu. This included leafleting and demonstrating in the rain, and attending long meetings and lock-ins in the pub afterwards, which earned trust and respect, built rapport, and facilitated

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<sup>36</sup> These issues were highlighted by other activists, and are fully discussed in Chapter 6.

<sup>37</sup> This is based on my own observations and experience having resided in Liverpool for eight years; as a season ticket holder, this hostility is particularly common at Liverpool Football Club matches.

making genuine friendships (see Hall, 2009). I would often meet some participants outside of the confines of ‘doing politics’, and there was a distinct blurring between what I had previously considered to be research and non-research activities; I became a friend *and* co-activist, and, in truth, often had to remind people about the focus of my research. However, in a similar vein to Pini (2004), I occupied a range of subject positions according to different movement participants, and this also impacted upon the research. Hence, while I made some great friends and earned the utmost respect of some actors, I had strained relationships with others. This could have been due to relative unfamiliarity – for example, when access to those individuals was more limited – or it may have resulted from political differences articulated during the course of ethnographic engagement. Activists are not a homogeneous group, and the way that a researcher is positioned within a movement can be profoundly contradictory; my positionality was complex and dynamic, shifting from one moment to the next. In turn, when I later expressed sympathy with LCC’s perspective, this drew suspicion from some activists, although, in recognition of the extreme polarity of the debate, I was careful to assert this changed positionality in a sensitive and constructive way. In truth, however, this shifting positionality occurred concurrently to the fall-out of the movement, and my resulting ethnographic disengagement (addressed in 4.5.3). This experience also emphasises the scholarly importance of place for contextualising and shaping the practicing of an activist ethnography, a concept which has been surprisingly overlooked within existing literature.

In addition, the literature on activist ethnography assumes a relatively fixed position for the researcher, who is considered to ‘take side’ with the movement he/she is researching; adopting a stance which remains stable throughout the struggle (and period of research) from which the researcher, as a movement activist, makes credible interventions into political praxis. The contribution of this research, however, demonstrates the complexities of this approach, where one’s political identity (and strategic outlook) is never teleologically determined, but is instead always ‘in becoming’; rather than ever conceivably reaching an end point, political identities are always malleable and defined by innumerable outcomes. The method of an activist ethnography must therefore be understood as a ‘journey’ whereby the researcher begins with an initial political identity or orientation, but which is always being remoulded according to, and during, the collective direction of travel which the group takes. In this research, I began from a position of principled support for anti-austerity politics, and ‘travelled’ with this movement for a sustained period of time while, gradually, my stance turned to a more nuanced one which credited LCC and began to appreciate the tensions they are grappling with at the municipal level. This was not an abrupt shift, but rather an outcome of months of deliberation (with fellow activists) over the limitations of local anti-austerity politics, the frustrations borne through this, and increased doubt about the ability of the movement to conjure credible

political alternatives at the municipal scale. This deliberation involved high levels of stress, tension and doubt, political debate and self-reflection, and thus should be recognised as part of my own political realisation and identity formation, as much as it also constituted that for the group. Where, in particular, militant ethnographic accounts tend to uncritically celebrate the implication of the researcher into grassroots politics, the contention of this thesis is that further reflection must take place on how a researcher's political identity is always in a process of becoming, and to consider the various strengths, limitations and consequences this might have for the productivity of the method overall.

#### 4.5.2 *The Affective Experience of Activist Research*

While the growing literature on conducting activist ethnography has addressed the ways in which the body can be mobilised for the purposes of activism (Juris, 2007; Routledge, 2002; Russell, 2015), the affective and embodied implications of this method are significantly underdeveloped, bar some notable exceptions (see Brown and Pickerill, 2009). While gaining ground in feminist literature generally (Hall, 2009; Wilkinson, 2016), this is a profound oversight for a method which advocates “putting one's body on the line” (Juris, 2007: 165). In the absence of such literature, I offer a few reflections. First, aligning with movement participants provides possibilities for intimacy, friendships and solidarities which last well beyond the ethnographic process; I shared my mobile number, became Facebook friends, and still meet up socially with some activists who have now become friends. Indeed, I have been invited to individuals' homes as well as their birthday parties. This observation is not a warning against ‘going native’ (Fuller, 1999) – characterised by a closeness with the research at the expense of detached, critical observation – but a call to think carefully about how these friendships are managed *vis-à-vis* the various ethical considerations (Hall, 2009), and in particular with reference to the growing importance of social networking websites to social movement organisation.

Secondly, capital A activist accounts underplay how activism can be stressful, frustrating, anxiety-laden and all-encompassing process; I often reflected feeling incredibly tired. In practice, it was very difficult to keep up the various responsibilities I felt, and to balance those commitments with my pre-existing private and social life. I would often be in need of a night off to rest, but simultaneously felt obliged to attend meetings in order to retain my commitment to a particular group, and even felt guilty as clearly the context of the research – austerity politics – meant that many individuals were inevitably suffering worse than me. Thirdly, the research changed *me*. Following 21 months of engaged political work, I am undoubtedly more knowledgeable and critical, sharper, more networked, possess greater confidence, and am better at public speaking. Yet, I am simultaneously more humbled, unsure, confused, and

conflicted by this experience. The affective and embodied experience of conducting an activist ethnography has changed my positionality, personality, and worldview. This is also the case for more conventional forms of ethnographic research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), but these issues are heightened when working under an explicit political commitment, and such reflections seek to make a refreshing and honest intervention into less-reflective, capital A activist ethnographies.

#### *4.5.3 The Complex Terrain of Social Movements*

Much research using the activist ethnographic method begins from the standpoint of ‘insider’ and has been shaped in a context of working with relatively coherent, stable and self-contained groups (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014). Where research has taken place amongst political milieus constituted of groups which are diverse, adversarial and characterised by ideological conflict (e.g. Halvorsen, 2015), the literature offers few pointers on how to conduct politically-committed research satisfactorily. This is not a call to ‘rise above’ these tensions – for interacting within this milieu inevitably implicates the researcher within it (Davies, 2009) – but to think critically how the activist ethnographer can negotiate the resulting challenges. In one interview, a Labour councillor warned that “people who get caught up in the ‘hard-left’ [in Liverpool]; they’re chewed up and they’re spat out. They’re just fodder.”<sup>38</sup> While this claim is certainly not representative of my own experiences, it nonetheless highlights the emergent tensions existing between some of the different groups outlined in *Table 4.1*. Where theoretically the activist ethnographer is willed to take sides, I learned that this can have serious implications for access as well as building trust. Speaking to an individual of one group on a demonstration can mean there is a risk of being positioned by other activists as ‘siding’ with the former’s organisation, a risk that can cause unease, hesitation and suspicion from the latter.<sup>39</sup> This posed further challenges when, for example, I wanted to attend the meetings of different groups. In this case, I reaffirmed that I was genuinely open-minded, sympathetic and politically undecided, and that as a scholar(-activist) I was committed to exploring different perspectives. Thereafter, engaging in rigorous and honest debate about the relative merits of each perspective did enough to allay activists’ fears. Still, when accusations of fascist involvement within some anti-austerity groups led to movement fall-out, the implications of taking a principled position were that access was restricted to those groups, and also meant a reduced chance of securing an interview. Yet, much of this conflict would be unbeknownst to the relative newcomer. For example, in one instance, two groups/parties shared historic differences on the positions they adopted during the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas Dispute. Many

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<sup>38</sup> Cllr Jane Corbett (Labour), interview.

<sup>39</sup> On many occasions, I was assumed to be a member of a particular party or organisation if I were simply seen talking to individuals of that organisation on a demonstration, field notes (various).

historic personal conflicts were also present (Chapter 6). Regardless of whether I was defined as an insider or outsider, practicing politics and political research in this environment was highly challenging. Thus, while living in Liverpool provided ease of access to the research site, this did not guarantee the smooth roll-out of an activist ethnography.

Moreover, political research requires hope (Solnit, 2004). That is, the researcher must engage under the belief that the movement can conceivably contribute to the production of alternative political imaginaries. Once this hope finally broke down, owing to movement fall-out and my own increasingly critical stance, this presented a series of challenges. I was becoming frustrated with dominant actors who were unwilling to reconsider aspects of movement analysis and strategy. It seemed that an individual could only be taken as a credible political actor by reproducing common movement discourses.<sup>40</sup> On reflection, I did manage to negotiate this contested terrain by carving out a space in which other similarly-minded movement participants and I sought to generate alternative analyses, but it did not have a significant impact upon the politics of the milieu. While Russell (2015) deliberates the risk of researcher drop-out as one suffers the pressures of having to write the scholarly thesis, I found that the ongoing dynamics of the movement led to a more ‘natural’ exit from the movement in February 2016, whereas I had previously intended to participate long after the thesis was completed.<sup>41</sup> However, this posed the concern of how to position the writing of this thesis appropriately. I therefore conclude by making clear that I am speaking from the perspective of a still sympathetic, yet critical, researcher and former activist now disengaged from anti-austerity politics in the city. The value of such research is now drawn out in the following empirical chapters.

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<sup>40</sup> This observation was discussed and corroborated by other activists, and is analysed in Chapter 6.

<sup>41</sup> In late 2015, the umbrella organisation, Liverpool against the Cuts, effectively dissolved. This occurred parallel to the growth of Merseyside Momentum, which many activists decided to turn to.

## Chapter Five

### Situating Austerity Urbanism: The Case of Liverpool City Council

#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter examines how local authorities are responding to austerity in a period of profound and unprecedented fiscal retrenchment. The dominant conceptual framework of ‘austerity urbanism’ (Peck, 2012, 2016) portrays municipal governments as submissively implementing austerity measures in ways consistent with techno-managerialism (Davies and Blanco, 2017). Interrogating the example of Liverpool City Council (LCC), this chapter holds that such structuralist accounts fail to consider how the politics of austerity are both discursively and materially ‘pulled down’ by a local authority and other institutional actors (Newman, 2014; Penny, 2016), and how austerity politics has, therefore, become (re)framed and actualised according to certain place-specific contexts (Fuller, 2017; Fuller and West, 2017). This chapter contributes to emerging literature which locates austerity urbanism as a highly variegated process (Meegan *et al.*, 2014; Newman, 2014), and answers Fuller and West’s (2017) invitation to explore the ‘geographies of austerity urbanism’. The results from Liverpool make three interventions in the debate: first, that austerity is ‘absorbed’ by the local state and politicised in ways contrary to structuralist interpretations; secondly, local government is therefore not passive but a “strategic actor” (Newman, 2014: 3290) in the enactment, negotiation and contestation of local forms of austerity urbanism; and thirdly, the possibilities for alternatives to austerity depend upon particular mobilisations of *place*-based discourses and identities, which are constantly being disrupted and (re)shaped from below (Featherstone, 2015). Unpacking the geographies of austerity urbanism shows that, for LCC, austerity is at once rhetorically contested yet, paradoxically, embraced as the transformative catalyst to radically reshape urban governance (and with it civil society), and to embark upon new rounds of place-making (Boland, 2008; Sykes *et al.*, 2013).

The chapter proceeds as follows: section 5.2 reviews the literature on austerity urbanism and considers the extent to which local authorities are managing, resisting, and producing alternatives to austerity at the local level, and concludes that more place-sensitive investigations are required. Thereafter, section 5.3 examines how austerity is being absorbed by LCC and the different discourses which inform the latter’s approach to governing ‘in/against’ austerity, and section 5.4 examines the role of LCC in crafting consensus and place-making through engagement with local communities. Section 5.5 considers the possibilities and limits of austerity-inspired urban entrepreneurialism as a means to emancipate local communities and pursue social justice at the municipal scale, before section 5.6



summaries what insights have been gained through interpreting austerity urbanism through a geographical lens.

## **5.2 Rethinking Austerity Urbanism: A Conceptual Overview**

Since David Harvey's (1989) influential thesis on urban entrepreneurialism, scholars of critical urban studies have attended to the increasingly enterprising tendencies of the local state since the late 1970s. This 'new' urban politics has arguably acquired consensus across political and geographical contexts (Cochrane *et al.*, 1996), but economic competition between regions has also been a historic feature of northern England's politics (Nurse, 2015). Within this paradigm, Peck (2017b: 330) observes that the late entrepreneurial conjuncture is "one marked by the effective exhaustion and practical stagnation of the staple repertoire of entrepreneurial-city interventions". 'Austerity urbanism' therefore represents a shift away from earlier urban entrepreneurial forms of development towards a new mode of urban governance characterised by withdrawal (rather than expansion). The intention, therefore, is to shrink the local state (Peck, 2017a). Prosecuted within already neoliberalised terrain, austerity urbanism is distinguished by the emerging logics of 'deficit politics' which invoke legitimacy for tighter budgetary restraints (Peck, 2012, 2016), and risk is devolved to the urban scale without the ensuing powers of mitigation (Davidson and Ward, 2014). This successive purging has resulted in the cumulative incapacitation of municipal authorities, which are implicated with simply *managing* the fiscal crisis; where the possibilities for resistance or progressive urban strategies once appeared credible, urban governance is now dominated by forms of 'zombie neoliberalism', where growth strategies have remained resoundingly resilient despite their inability to deliver, and where alternatives have failed to emerge despite the loss of ideological hegemony (Peck, 2010). In turn, local government has become complicit in remaking the urban landscape (Hackworth and Smith, 2001) and denying opportunities for political alternatives (Fuller, 2017).

In the US, neoliberal restructuring has long been a feature of municipal politics (Davidson and Ward, 2014), but these practices have become intensified under austerity urbanism (Peck, 2012, 2016). In the UK, austerity urbanism reads as a 'secondary offensive' that follows the cuts of the 1980s (Talbot and Talbot, 2011), although there are some parallels: local authorities are compelled by law to deliver austerity; while they may spend reserves, deficit budgeting and other types of fiscal exploration are prohibited. Austerity has also been more commonly received with acquiescence rather than overt contestation at the municipal scale (Fuller and West, 2017), and what Davies and Blanco (2017: 8) term 'austrian realism', whereby cuts are implemented "in a spirit of realpolitik due to statutory constraints and for lack of any perceived political alternative". While the radical socialist authorities of the New Left saw the local state

as a platform for developing counter-hegemonic projects to Thatcherism, such as new economic strategies and experimenting with innovative forms of service delivery and citizen participation (Boddy and Fudge, 1984; Lansley *et al.*, 1989; Mackintosh and Wainwright, 1987), the ongoing legacy of defeats during that era continues to haunt Labour municipalities into a politics of no alternative, to the extent that austerity has been expedited without significant impediment (Davies and Blanco, 2017; Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013). This framework has also been informed by post-political theory, which emphasises the growing significance of consensus-seeking strategies and techno-managerialist approaches adopted by local elites to depoliticise decision-making processes (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012; Haughton *et al.*, 2016; Peck, 2016). Efforts to promote local community engagement are thus strategically mobilised by local authorities as a means to demonstrate their receptiveness to public opinion, yet early research suggests that citizen participation fails to drive policy decisions under austerity urbanism (see Davies and Blanco, 2017). The consequence, therefore, is that urban centres are depicted as passive victims of fiscal retrenchment, left with little room for manoeuvre, and tasked with arriving at the most effective managerialist approaches to negotiating their crisis-driven budgets.

However, such structuralist interpretations deny the agency of local authorities. They are instead crucial actors in re-producing and re-working austerity urbanism, which is ‘pulled down’ to the local scale in contradictory and contested ways (Newman, 2014; Penny, 2016). Austerity urbanism is thus not a universal form, but a process of struggle with a diverse set of stories and practices, while local authorities may be incubators of new possibilities that can adapt neoliberal logics or establish alternative pathways (Fanelli *et al.*, 2017). Also instructive here is work on neoliberalism as assemblage, which emphasises the uneven collaboration of a network of institutional and non-institutional actors operating across different times, scales and political expressions (Allen and Cochrane, 2010; Ong, 2007). It is precisely this fragmentation across space that produces possibilities for oppositional groups. *Figure 5.1* stresses the agency of local authorities to *adapt to*, *challenge* or *imagine alternatives to* austerity in ways which disrupt austerity urbanism and promote alternatives in the pursuit of social justice. The city scale still offers the potential, therefore, to radically re-conceptualise notions of well-being and redistribution, and to involve a greater range of civil society actors within more empowered urban governance in order to transcend austerity urbanism (Meegan *et al.*, 2014). This is exemplified through a diverse economies perspective (Gibson-Graham, 2006), which views credibly more heterodox forms of economic development allied to broader definitions of ‘work’, and in which social economy initiatives can flourish (Meegan, 2003; North, 1998).



**Figure 5.1:** Local Government Responses to Austerity (Source: NEF, 2014).

The possibilities and limits posed upon municipal authorities are reflected through *variegated* austerity (Meegan *et al.*, 2014), which acknowledges its ongoing reconstitution as contingent upon the particular institutional legacies and economic specificities of both national and local states, as well as competing narratives of culpability and local dynamics of formal and informal political mobilisation (Blyth, 2013; Meegan *et al.*, 2014; Overmans and Timm-Arnold, 2016). Some research has therefore sought to examine how local political actors discursively construct and embed crisis in local discourse (Bayırbağ *et al.*, 2017; Fuller and West, 2017; Hinkley, 2017), but this literature has tended to neglect an engagement with urban social movements which seek to contest and re-shape those narratives, and overlook how *place* is mobilised to legitimate or contest austerity urbanism. Whilst structuralist analyses have been

illustrative in the current conjuncture, this existing conceptual framework would be greatly enriched by answering Fuller's (2017) call to explore the 'geographies of austerity urbanism'; that is, the 'how' and 'why' of those social practices and urban landscapes where austerity occurs. This approach rejects the tendency to view local government as a unitary actor with a singular or consensual purpose (North *et al.*, 2017), but instead views localised austerity as being absorbed into prevailing or residual political contexts (Newman, 2014). To this end, the particular histories and geographies of place produce a portfolio of political potentialities which are always open to contestation (Featherstone, 2008). Critically, what austerity means and whether strategies to manage or contest it are considered successful depends upon this context; austerity is not rolled out in a monolithic way, and such interpretations deny the agency to create transformative visions of the future (Featherstone *et al.*, 2015). Finally, taking inspiration from North *et al.* (2017), ethnographic analyses can shed light on how urban elites attempt to manage (and re/de-politicise) policy-making outcomes at the local scale. In doing so, this chapter makes a significant contribution to reappraising the geographies of austerity urbanism.

Party	No. of Councillors
Labour	80
Green	4
Liberal Democrat	4
Liberal	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>90</b>

**Table 5.1:** Constitution of Liverpool City Council following May 2016 Local Elections (Source: Liverpool City Council, 2016a).

Name	Party	Votes	%
Joe Anderson ( <b>Elected</b> )	Labour	51332	<b>52.61</b>
Richard Kemp	Liberal Democrat	20598	<b>21.11</b>
Thomas Crone	Green	10609	<b>10.87</b>
Roger Bannister	Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition	4950	<b>5.07</b>
Alan Hutchinson	Independent	3964	<b>4.06</b>
Tony Caldeira	Conservative Party	3533	<b>3.62</b>
Paul Duane Rimmer	English Democrats "Putting England First"	2590	<b>2.65</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>97576</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 5.2:** Mayoral Election Result, 5 May 2016 (Source: Liverpool City Council, 2016b).

Name	Party	Title
Cllr Jane Corbett	Labour	Cabinet Member – Social Inclusion, Fairness & Equalities
Cllr Roz Gladden	Labour	Cabinet Member – Adult & Children’s Social Care and Health (now Deputy Lord Mayor)
Cllr Frank Hont	Labour	Cabinet Member – Housing
Cllr Barry Kushner	Labour	Cabinet Member – Children’s Services
Cllr Gary Millar	Labour	Mayoral Lead for Business & International Trade
Cllr Steve Munby	Labour	Cabinet Member – Neighbourhoods
Cllr Nick Small	Labour	Assistant Mayor of Liverpool; Cabinet Member – Education, Employment & Skills
Cllr Tom Crone	Green	Leader – Green Party Group
Cllr Richard Kemp	Liberal Democrat	Leader – Liberal Democrat Party Group
Phil Knibb		Chief Executive, Alt Valley Community Trust

**Table 5.3:** Semi-Structured Interviews Conducted with LCC and Third-Sector Organisations (November 2015). Note: all councillors referenced in the footnotes represent the Labour Party unless otherwise stated.

### 5.3 Municipal Discourses of (Anti-)Austerity

This section examines how the politics of austerity are ‘pulled down’ by a local authority and, in so doing, first illustrates LCC’s agency in constructing oppositional narratives to those of central government (5.3.1). Thereafter, it produces discursive strategies about what austerity means and how it should be managed (5.3.2). In contrast to structuralist accounts which stress local councils’ limits of governing ‘in/against’ austerity, LCC is seen to be engaged in a paradoxical ‘reluctant embrace’ of austerity urbanism, where, on the one hand, austerity measures are met with increased rhetoric against central government, yet, on the other, are embraced as a means to radically transform the city (5.3.3).

#### 5.3.1 Politicising the Crisis in Liverpool

LCC displays agency in the way it discursively engages in framing local political discourse and policy responses about austerity, by refracting blame back towards central government, as well as contesting the unfairness of the cuts. As Hinkley (2017) posits, stories of urban fiscal crisis serve two important functions; to diagnose the causes of crisis, and to justify a set of prescribed solutions. In Liverpool, this takes place through particular discursive scalar politics which frame austerity as something beyond the agency of the local council, instead produced by (national and global) factors external to the city’s control. While Fuller and West (2017) discuss how, in Birmingham, the local council has been unwilling to extensively critique austerity, in Liverpool there has been explicit displacement of the crisis towards central government, evidenced by LCC’s 2013 petition to the Coalition Government arguing “a moral

case for fairness in cuts”.<sup>42</sup> Spearheaded by the elected (Labour) mayor, Joe Anderson, the Labour-dominated council (see *Tables 5.1* and *5.2*) has invoked dystopian imaginaries to cement this narrative, in ways that chime with Peck’s (2012, 2016) notion of ‘disaster politics’ and the ‘end of local government’ discourse that has pervaded council thinking (Fuller and West, 2017). As Liverpool’s mayor noted,

watching the deteriorating state of local government’s finances is a bit like a scene in a thriller where the nuclear reactor’s dial flickers in the red zone. Meltdown is imminent.<sup>43</sup>

The council has warned that, by 2018, the city will face the possibility of failing to fund even statutory services (*Liverpool Echo*, 2015a). As in Hinkley (2017), a local crisis has thus been discursively constructed which shapes how policy problems and their solutions are understood. The mayor also contends that

protesting in Liverpool is like blaming the victim of a burglary. We have been robbed – we should aim our anger at those who have committed the crime.<sup>44</sup>

LCC therefore invokes scalar discourses to redirect citizens’ ‘anger’ towards central government, where the national distribution of cuts was explained through party politics. Councillor Hont explains that:

The northern industrial areas have really suffered compared to more prosperous areas like down south, who have had nothing like the cuts that we’ve had. It’s party political. Why wouldn’t you hit an area where you’ve got no MPs, where they’re never going to vote Conservative? They [Tories] look after their own.<sup>45</sup>

Liverpool therefore suffers a ‘double-punch’, as a city highly dependent upon central government grants due to highly concentrated levels of social deprivation, which also receives an unusually high proportion of cuts relative to the national scale (Meegan *et al.*, 2014). This is explained by the city’s lack of a sufficiently generative council tax base, which disadvantages it in raising alternative forms of income<sup>46</sup>, and its large public-sector workforce (a foremost austerity target). Additionally national welfare reform has disproportionately stripped money out of the local economy (see Meegan *et al.*, 2014). According to city councillors, the cuts are also profoundly ideological, as “the government thinks that councils

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<sup>42</sup> Liverpool Labour (2013).

<sup>43</sup> Joe Anderson (quoted in *Liverpool Echo*, 2015a: n.p.).

<sup>44</sup> Liverpool Labour (2015).

<sup>45</sup> Cllr Frank Hont, interview.

<sup>46</sup> At the time of writing, council tax cannot be increased by more than 3.99 per cent, half of which is ring-fenced for social services, without first holding a local referendum (Bailey *et al.*, 2015). Until recently it was no more than 2 per cent, with the cost of holding a vote expecting to match the expected return from the tax increase (Crewe, 2016).

should fund themselves from business rates and council tax receipts”,<sup>47</sup> which represents an increasing responsabilisation of local government under austerity urbanism, but is paradoxically combined with a small-state ideology committed to de-municipalisation and the furtherance of private and third-sector organisations into urban governance (Peck, 2012, 2016).

Austerity is therefore constructed through the lens of party politics, as the Conservative-led central government is argued to be promoting (primarily) Labour-run councils as the vanguard of austerity imposition, in a way which effectively allows the Conservative Party to “transport blame” onto those Labour local authorities, whilst simultaneously appeasing calls for small-state welfare in “middle England”.<sup>48</sup> This is possible because local authorities are tasked with the everyday realities of fiscal retrenchment:

Who’s visible? Who can you get at? Physically, who can you go and see? It’s the council. You can’t get at government, you can’t get at Cameron or Osborne.<sup>49</sup>

These antagonistic discourses invoke particular imaginative geographies of place which position LCC as being opposed to central government-enforced austerity, and refute any responsibility for the budgetary crisis; rather, it is a dystopian scenario produced through factors external to the city’s control. Nonetheless, LCC evidences political agency in the ways that it communicates this displacement of blame. City councillors repeatedly stress the importance of ‘getting the message out there’ in order to articulate the perceived unfairness of the cuts *to Liverpool*, which took a form of awareness-raising:

We’ve been trying to do the best we can in very difficult circumstances, and at the same time campaign against the government because what people were saying was ‘you’re not shouting back!’. Well, we are, but the problem is that it’s not getting picked up by the media.<sup>50</sup>

‘Shouting back’ also necessitates debate in Parliament:

All I can ask for today is for the Government to be fair to local authorities in general, to be fair to the most deprived local authorities and to recognise that in Liverpool City Council they have an enterprising, positive local authority, which is there to serve its people, bringing jobs and working with the private sector. Surely it deserves a better deal for public services to serve our local communities.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Cllr Barry Kushner, interview.

<sup>48</sup> Cllr Gary Millar, interview.

<sup>49</sup> Cllr Jane Corbett, interview.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* See also *Financial Times* (2013).

<sup>51</sup> Louise Ellman MP, Liverpool Riverside (Labour), Hansard, HC Deb 10 February 2015, Column 666.

In addition, LCC has commissioned research into the effects of austerity on thirty Liverpool families in low-paid employment, aiming to narrate the everyday experiences of austerity ‘beyond statistics’; the report was presented to Parliament (see Kyprianou, 2015). This report, combined with an infographics campaign publicised on social media (see *Figures 5.2* and *5.3*), was intended to reinforce this narrative to the local populace. A fuller discussion appears later, but for now the chapter observes LCC’s agency in constructing local political discourse *vis-à-vis* central government-imposed austerity, in ways which diagnose the causes of crisis and produce an alternative narrative; what then, is the solution?



**Figure 5.2:** Infographic: How is the Council Funded? (Source: Liverpool City Council, 2014a).



**Figure 5.3:** Infographic: The Reduction of Central Government Funding (Source: Liverpool City Council, 2014b).



### 5.3.2 *Austrian Realism?*

Davies and Blanco (2017) note that Cardiff and Leicester City Councils are characterised by stable ‘austrian realist’ regimes, a political culture defined by central government authority, where no mainstream social actor refuses austerity and resistance fails to overturn policy. This reflects the national Labour ‘dented shield’ strategy which advocates that Labour councils should concentrate on mitigating the worst effects of the cuts and simultaneously improve services, rather than engage in outright confrontation (Lavalette and Mooney, 2000; Lowes, 2012). Echoing Neil Kinnock’s strategy of the 1980s, the Labour Party is concerned with rebuilding trust and renewing itself as a credible party of government and thus emphasises pragmatism over ideology (Dillon and Fanning, 2016); indeed, the 2012 City Deal demonstrates Liverpool’s willingness to cooperate with central government when deemed strategically effective (Frost and North, 2013; Meegan *et al.*, 2014). Within austrian realism, a critical task for senior politicians has been to justify to the wider council and the local populace the apparent paradox of rhetorically opposing austerity on the one hand, whilst legitimating its imposition on the other (Fuller, 2017). In Liverpool, this is allied to a scalar politics which places agency for austerity at the national level, where Joe Anderson has consistently reiterated that a Labour Government is the only answer to the council’s problems.<sup>52</sup> Crewe (2016) argues that “councils have little political ‘ownership’ of the cuts they make – they are seen, rightly, as a consequence of central government decisions”, and this discourse is supported empirically (Fuller and West, 2017). However, such commentary fails to expose how austerity decisions are enacted locally, and how local parties politicise austerity in order to promote their own interests. In Liverpool, one councillor argued that:

We are an example of how, when necessity calls, when needs must, we have dealt with it brilliantly. I’m not afraid to say that. I don’t think we’re bragging when we say that; we really have addressed it cleverly.<sup>53</sup>

Within the confines of austrian realism, Liverpool Labour councillors reiterate their deference to central government on austerity budgets, but valorise their agency to cooperate with the nation-state through ‘positive engagement’, which is described as neither “the Militant approach of total opposition and no quarter given, [nor] is it rollover and let it happen”.<sup>54</sup> This involves instigating a more ‘mature’ relationship with central government (contrasted to the Militant era), despite competing political allegiances which constitute a pragmatism based in *realpolitik* (Fuller, 2017). As Councillor Millar noted:

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<sup>52</sup> Field notes (15/08/14).

<sup>53</sup> Cllr Frank Hont, interview.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

My natural inclination is to stay well clear of confrontation; negativity, argument, vitriol doesn't get you anywhere. Having a conversation with MPs of all parties, about the realism of the situation is incredibly important. I don't like that kind of tribal politics; it doesn't work anymore. Our residents, our communities, want something better.<sup>55</sup>

This is accompanied by claims of togetherness, which assert openness and inclusivity by arguing that people understand the challenges faced, in ways which frame austerity as inevitable, thus crafting acquiescence and glossing over resistance (Fuller, 2017). Austerian realism is therefore characterised by strategies that pursue non-confrontational and pragmatic solutions to austerity in dialogue with central government, and in ways which transcend 'tribal politics' and elide class antagonism; for example, one councillor brazenly claimed that Liverpool was competing to become "Cameron's favourite Labour council."<sup>56</sup> This has been accompanied by the intensification of the city's proactive place-marketing strategies, where, for example, Joe Anderson accompanied George Osborne to the International Festival for Business in Shanghai (2015), and the Chancellor remarked:

We represent different political parties but we're working together for the benefit of Liverpool and the benefit of Merseyside. And Joe and I were going at it as a tag team, to try and persuade [investors] to put money into Liverpool, for the benefit of Liverpudlians.<sup>57</sup>

However, in 2011, the city withdrew itself from the vanguard of the Coalition's Big Society project, citing the jeopardy of spending cuts (*Guardian*, 2011; Jones *et al.*, 2016), demonstrating the tensions inherent to these scalar politics, where the council must effectively navigate central government reforms whilst simultaneously appearing as an 'anti-austerity council' locally. This is partly achieved through a pragmatism which promotes financial imperatives as incontestable and further reduces scope for alternative possibilities (Penny, 2016). For example, Councillor Millar argues:

It isn't necessarily fair but life is tough for us all and we all have mortgages, and we all have rents, and we all have debts, and we all have deficits, and we all have to manage what we have to do. I'm all for managing our resource, and I'm all for managing money.<sup>58</sup>

This conflation with household budgeting is well-documented in the literature (Blyth, 2013; Kushner and Kushner, 2013), and further exemplifies the internalisation of market logic and austerity politics into the public sphere, where under austerian realism there is no alternative (Davies and Blanco, 2017). Councillors are therefore made responsible for managing the

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<sup>55</sup> Cllr Gary Millar, interview.

<sup>56</sup> Cllr Steve Munby, interview.

<sup>57</sup> Chancellor George Osborne (quoted in *Liverpool Echo*, 2015b: n.p.).

<sup>58</sup> Cllr Gary Millar, interview.

trajectory of cities (Cochrane *et al.*, 1996; Leitner, 1990), where pragmatic governance is administered through top-down techno-managerialist strategies to mitigate the effects of austerity, as well as to channel and control grievance. The view was expressed that:

It's really easy as a politician to stand up and to tell people what they want to hear. You can say to people 'I'll defend your jobs', 'no cuts in jobs and services' and you'll get cheered and you'll get re-elected. It's much more difficult to tell people what they don't want to hear, that there's these huge changes going on.<sup>59</sup>

I thought 'right, this has got to be done'. You can't just say 'we're not gonna' do this, so we'll call an election and let somebody else do it'; that's just cowardly. If you're in a position of power then you need to use that power, and when you're a servant of the city you try and do the very best you can.<sup>60</sup>

In alignment with Davies and Blanco (2017), there has also not been a sustained or effective critique of austerity waged by opposition parties within LCC, producing a consensus which solidifies austere realism and reduces scope for alternatives. The debate within the town hall is not, therefore, about *whether* the cuts should happen, but *how* and *where* the cuts should fall.<sup>61</sup> Both the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party in Liverpool have tended to criticise the strategic direction of the council (in terms of efficacy or efficiency) rather than the logics of austerity *per se*, as Green Party Leader Councillor Crone outlines:

We have accepted that the money has been taken out, or it's not been put into the council's bank account [...] Now however much we hate the cuts, and however much we resent them being inflicted; I know Joe Anderson, I know he doesn't want to make a single cut. I've got plenty of criticism for that man, but I know he's not enjoying making these cuts [...] We have always put forward budget amendments which will have slight differences to the Labour Party, and will attempt to make the budget less painful. It's always a small improvement in terms of the situation; the changes we can offer can't outweigh how awful the cuts are in Liverpool. [It's] shuffling money about a little bit.<sup>62</sup>

Despite operating within the same logic, local parties have carved out unique stances in relation to austerity. The mayor dismissed the Green strategy as political posturing, and simply "robbing Peter to pay Paul",<sup>63</sup> which reiterated the Labour narrative that their party was best prepared to deal with the crisis, albeit couched in managerial terms. This shows that the council clearly enjoys political agency in crafting discursive strategies about what austerity means and how it should be managed, even when operating in contexts of relatively limited political autonomy. This suggests that one must interrogate further the dichotomy on austerity urbanism

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<sup>59</sup> Cllr Nick Small, interview.

<sup>60</sup> Cllr Jane Corbett, interview.

<sup>61</sup> Field notes (various).

<sup>62</sup> Cllr Tom Crone (Green Party), interview.

<sup>63</sup> Field notes (15/08/14).

within academic literature, which assumes that there must be either total complicit acquiescence to cuts or overt confrontation (see Davies and Blanco, 2017; Peck, 2012, 2016, 2017a). In Liverpool, there is something more nuanced taking place.

### *5.3.3 Austerity as Opportunity*

The research undertaken for this thesis identified Liverpool's approach as something more than defensive, and advances that the city pursues more feisty forms of urban entrepreneurialism and fresh approaches to urban governance in the pursuit of social justice. These, it is further argued, constitute a coherent and credible alternative to austerity. Section 5.5 critiques this strategy, but first the chapter analyses how the council opens up this discursive space to legitimate fiscal retrenchment through claims of democratisation and empowering local communities. Whilst academic research has illustrated how austerity has been mobilised by the political right (Chapter 3), Liverpool's Labour council is also seen to embrace austerity as the transformative catalyst to renew and reshape urban governance, where local authority control is cast as monolithic, bureaucratic, paternalistic and disempowering in ways resonant with New Left critiques (see Cockburn, 1977; London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1979). This concurs with emerging research such as that by Fuller and West (2017: 12), in which the authors observed "the justification and celebration of austerity as a moment of enlightenment in the [Birmingham] Council's history", where cutbacks were depicted as empowering city managers to deliver change in ways that were either not possible, or at least not attempted, under previous funding scenarios (see also Fuller, 2017; Jones *et al.*, 2016). As Liverpool Labour Councillors argued:

The thing is with austerity; had we not had that, would I have carried on doing things because it was easier to do it? Would I have been tempted, if I'd have had that money, just to carry on doing things as they were, and not be as radical?<sup>64</sup>

To some extent invention is borne out of necessity, and I think that some of the ways we've been forced to rethink how we work is, in some respects, improving a service. Some of those changes are good, they're breaking down some of the Silos and I think that will put us in good stead going further forward.<sup>65</sup>

Such perspectives involve reiterating a series of austerity tropes about reducing the scale and scope of municipal government, demonstrating the extent to which austerity logics have pervaded political thinking in Liverpool's local authority. Labour councillors describe the prevalence of a 'dependency-culture', for example:

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<sup>64</sup> Cllr Roz Gladden, interview.

<sup>65</sup> Cllr Barry Kushner, interview.

Old people shouldn't be in hospital, it's dangerous for them to be in hospital. They actually come out with more things than they go in with! Sometimes they come in and they never go back home again. If you're in there for more than a week, you actually lose your independence so quickly. So really we need them [out] as quickly as possible, not lingering in bloody nursing homes and residential homes. I don't want to do that, do you?! I wouldn't want my kids sticking me in some home playing bloody bingo!<sup>66</sup>

This moment of enlightenment has forced a move away from “dependency-based services”<sup>67</sup> towards commissioning by outcome, whereby third-sector organisations and various other actors are induced into service provision, which is reimagined as something beyond a mere contractual arrangement (Penny, 2016), to be further discussed in 5.5. Critically, this involves rethinking the role of local government as being beyond simply that of a service provider. Whilst this has been a predominant feature of urban entrepreneurialism, what is decidedly new is the way in which austerity has necessitated not the *withdrawal* of the local state but rather the introduction of much longer-term, interventionist mechanisms which seek to intensify the subjectification of local populations to the disciplines of market logics (see Newman, 2014). Rather than austerity urbanism, this expansion, or qualitative reinterpretation, of the functions of the local state points towards a more offensive strategy being deployed by the council. No longer tasked with merely administering services or managing budgets, the local authority is becoming implicated in actively reshaping its own institutions (and thus the city) according to new demands forced by austerity, even with a bio-political tinge:

Have a look at [anonymised]; one of the worst performing primary schools in the north-west. It is now the best performing primary school; attendance levels are up, health levels, physical attributes, physical health within the school is much better, and mental health much better. They are fed breakfast first thing in the morning, they get exercise first thing in the morning, they're healthier. If we can do that across all schools you will see a marked change in attainment levels through primary school to secondary school, to college, to university, to getting employment or getting training, or to going into business. We also have to build those kinds of strategies, not for the next four years as a political term, but for twenty or thirty years. That is the kind of model that fixes and prevents a lot of the issues that we have later in life.<sup>68</sup>

Effective austerity management requires more than managing budgets; instead, it is about creativity, risk-taking, deal-brokering, building trust and having a passion to transform the city (Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013). However, this has been paralleled by the threatened closure of Sure Start children's centres, which have been shown to perform a similar function in mitigating the effects of inequalities in early life (Crewe, 2016). To further justify doing ‘more

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<sup>66</sup> Cllr Roz Gladden, interview. The new Liverpool Royal Hospital is set to open in 2018 with fewer hospital beds than the one it will replace (BBC News, 2015).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Cllr Gary Millar, interview.

with less', the council has framed the transfer of public services to third-sector or community organisations as empowering local communities through developing new forms of hybrid partnership. In 2014, LCC announced that 11 of the 18 public libraries in Liverpool were at risk of closure unless willing parties volunteered to take over running the service. Facing accusations that the council was simply allowing the Library Service to fall into "managed decline" – which would thus legitimate ultimate closure<sup>69</sup> – councillors responded that the reorganisation of the libraries was actually a 'win-win':

As a Labour Party, we have to look at pre-1945 models; all the innovation came through local government, all the innovation came through mutuality, and all the innovation came through communities. The worst thing you can do on the left is to defend what is a flawed status quo. If you look at some of the community-managed libraries that we're about to set up – there's five of them across the city – that would bring the Library Service much closer to communities, it'll provide communities with something that is more fit for purpose, as well as being more cost effective [...]

You're sitting in an office in the city centre; you can't run those services in communities in a centralised way. There's [*sic*] opportunities there to completely transform those communities, [for example] in terms of employment opportunities for local people. You look at something like Kensington Library, there are few, if any, people working there at the minute who actually live in that community – this is a way of changing some of that.<sup>70</sup>

This idea was inspired by the early community transfer of Croxteth Library (see *Figure 5.4*), whereby control was handed over to the Alt Valley Community Trust (AVCT) in 2010:

Before Croxteth Library went over to them [AVCT] there were real problems with security. Once Alt Valley took it over, nobody messed with them. So we saved the cost of security guards.<sup>71</sup>

This library – which we saved – has quadrupled its book load since we've taken it over because we're more integrated into the community.<sup>72</sup>

This devolution of services is partly inspired by the 'what matters is what works' discourse of New Labour (Wilks-Heeg, 2003b), which is especially relevant in Liverpool given the history of Militant; under austerity, retaining good services counts, not political sloganeering (Frost and North, 2013). Such tropes are also evident in 'Big Society' thinking (see Norman, 2010), which advocates that local authorities are detached and unresponsive to community needs, and where devolving services and responsabilising local communities is assumed to provide opportunities for radical innovation. This has mirrored a growing emphasis on the

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<sup>69</sup> Field notes (06/10/14).

<sup>70</sup> Cllr Nick Small, interview.

<sup>71</sup> Cllr Steve Munby, interview.

<sup>72</sup> Phil Knibb, Chief Executive of Alt Valley Community Trust, interview.

coproduction of services (Penny, 2016; Whitfield, 2012), although evidence suggests that community capacity is in fact being undermined through austerity urbanism (Deas and Doyle, 2013; Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013). In Leicester and Cardiff, co-production was only “accepted as a last defence against full commercialisation, occupying a nebulous space between neoliberal self-help and contentious politics” (Davies and Blanco, 2017: 12). In five observed community consultations over the future of the libraries, residents unanimously declared their opposition to a devolved service, and acknowledged that their communities had no capacity to undertake its running, yet the council pressed on regardless.<sup>73</sup> Local authorities are therefore key agents in ‘pulling down’ and reframing the politics of austerity articulated at the national scale (Newman, 2014), and in Liverpool this takes the form of a ‘reluctant embrace’ of austerity urbanism typified by increased rhetoric against central government-imposed austerity and forms of austerian realism, while simultaneously embracing austerity to produce more strategic forms of intervention into the city and to radically reconfigure the role of local government.



**Figure 5.4:** Croxteth ‘Communiversities’ Library (Source: Alt Valley, 2017).

#### **5.4 Geographies of Austerity Urbanism**

This section explores how these different discourses are localised, re-framed and actualised in Liverpool. In so doing, it suggests that the current foreclosure of anti-austerity politics within the council is legitimated through particular mobilisations of place-based discourses and identities, which are also disrupted and re-shaped from below (see also Chapter 6). This analysis exposes how local authorities are actively implicated in performing austerity urbanism amid new rounds of place-making and identity re-formation. It also partially explains

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<sup>73</sup> Field notes (various).

why substantial collective resistance to austerity in Liverpool is lacking. While existing literature, at best, tacitly concedes that municipalities do differ in their responses to austerity (Davies and Blanco, 2017; Peck, 2016, 2017a), this section uncovers and thence discusses those strategies through which LCC has crafted, and continues to craft, consensus for austerity urbanism.

#### *5.4.1 Place-Making and Political Identities*

Chapter 2 contended that the peculiar historical and political geographies of Liverpool resulted in a unique response to the mid-1980s crisis (see also Frost and North, 2013). Past struggles have generated a “reservoir of memories” (Guzman-Concha, 2012: 409) through which existing repertoires of conflict are defined, while particular path-dependencies are imbricated within prevailing or residual political contexts (Newman, 2014). In the case of Liverpool, therefore, North (2010: 1380) holds that local elites have not found alternatives to urban entrepreneurialism credible, “especially when Liverpool’s experiences with the confrontational tactics of the Militant-led council are contrasted with observable city centre development”. This is supported by the national austere realism of Labour municipalities, a gloomy political landscape produced through those historic defeats under Thatcherism (Davies and Blanco, 2017). In Liverpool, the political possibilities for austerity resistance are foreclosed through the constant iteration of particular imagined geographies of the city, which depend on the mobilisation of certain narratives about the mid-1980s struggle to frame contemporary confrontation as unpalatable:

I feel sorry for people who think that [setting an illegal budget] will actually make a difference, because these people genuinely think that if I set an illegal budget then every other council in the country would follow suit and we’d bring the government down. Now that failed in the ‘80’s and it’s gonna fail today.<sup>74</sup>

Despite there being significant distance between complicit acquiescence to cuts and the experiences of the Militant-led council, LCC often publicly denies these nuances and exaggerates this binary, framing local political discourse within a dichotomy that reinforces the politics of ‘no alternative’. The strapline ‘illegal budget’ is constantly invoked during political debate – within council meetings and engagements with local communities,<sup>75</sup> and, as above, in presentations to the media – in order to discredit dissenters, particularly those identified as being on the ‘far-left’, whose ideas are considered to be “just simply not credible”.<sup>76</sup> For activists, this constitutes a form of ‘red scare’, or ‘dog whistle’ politics:

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<sup>74</sup> Joe Anderson on *Radio City Talk*, 10/11/14.

<sup>75</sup> Field notes (various).

<sup>76</sup> Cllr Frank Hont, interview.



Joe Anderson: he always raises this ‘red scare’, it’s like a dog whistle; [mimicking] ‘we don’t wanna go back to the ’80s’.<sup>77</sup>

Activists posit that this is effective political sloganeering which manages to disrupt resistance, even if it is not recognised as conveying truth.<sup>78</sup> Anderson’s quote also demonstrates Labour’s infantilisation of anti-austerity campaigners, where ‘feeling sorry’ for those who have a “romantic attachment”<sup>79</sup> to public services is iterated to contrast social-democratic “nostalgia”<sup>80</sup> to the ‘moderate’, ‘credible’ and ‘professional’ Liverpool Labour administration. The mobilisation of discourses of the 1980s demonstrates how place structures justifications for, and potential alternatives to, austerity, and shows how space, scale and time operate as key apparatuses through which austerity urbanism becomes realised. In particular, the notion that Liverpool was left in a state of ‘havoc’, or ‘chaos’ following the Militant-era, of which the long-term outcome was severe reputational damage, repeatedly emerged in interviews:

Liverpool Labour will not put in place an illegal budget. We will not take Liverpool back to the havoc of the 1980s, when Militant gave our city a reputation it didn’t deserve.<sup>81</sup>

Liverpool was near destroyed because of what happened in the 1980s. So let’s not forget that. Let’s also not forget some of the reputational damage that that’s done to the city and in some ways we’re still suffering from some of that. One of the big roles we’ve had as a city council is being able to turn round people’s perceptions of Liverpool – unfair perceptions in many ways, but the root of those in a lot of cases was because of what happened to this city in the 1980s.<sup>82</sup>

Invoking such disaster narratives about the city allowed Labour to position itself as ‘forward-thinking’ in contrast to a discourse of ‘going backwards’, of which the consequences would threaten the city’s future and be generational. Time is therefore mobilised as a central theme in such narratives, which is also supported through comparisons which emphasise the relative weaknesses of the labour movement, the growing de-politicisation of society and the tightening of local authorities’ fiscal autonomy as contributory factors to LCC’s austere realism.<sup>83</sup> The consensus states that, since the 1980s, the political and legislative manoeuvre for radical left urban politics has been compromised (Lansley *et al.*, 1989). Even Derek Hatton (cited in *Liverpool Echo*, 2011: n.p.) concurred:

When you look at the situation now, with the national leadership and the trade unions and a whole lot of other things, the comparison is virtually non-existent. While it’s

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<sup>77</sup> Member of Liverpool against the Cuts and former Militant supporter, interview.

<sup>78</sup> Field notes (12/03/15).

<sup>79</sup> Cllr Frank Hont, interview.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Liverpool Labour (2016).

<sup>82</sup> Cllr Nick Small, interview.

<sup>83</sup> Interviews (various).

OK to say they should put up a fight, in all fairness to Joe [Anderson] I think it's probably unrealistic. I would not be one of those to argue he should do what we did in the 1980s. It would be political suicide.

Austerity urbanism also hinges upon a repudiation of the political identities crafted during the Militant struggle, and makes new appeals to 'scouseness' in order to craft consensus in the city. Chapter 2 showed how Militant mobilised the scouse identity and channelled a 'shout against' the decades of economic decline that the city had suffered previous. Yet, in contemporary austerity politics, a different form of scouse political identity is being proposed, one which harnesses the enterprising spirit of the seafaring days and makes shared sacrifices in times of scarcity. While Joe Anderson continues to embody the "Tories' worst nightmare; a bolshie, big, angry, aggressive scouser"<sup>84</sup> expressing local pride and defiance, this is strategically aligned with non-confrontational strategies of positive engagement which emphasise new relational identities concerned with fighting strategically against central government. Contra the 'us' versus 'them' separatism of Militant (Kilfoyle, 2000), new Liverpool identities become politicised according to familiar austerity tropes, such as 'we're all in it together' and 'sharing the pain' in order to legitimate fiscal retrenchment. Requesting that Liverpoolians support plans for council tax rises, Mayor Joe Anderson (cited in *Liverpool Echo*, 2016a: n.p.), stated:

I understand the reasons why the people who said no did, they themselves are struggling as are many others living in our city. I was also surprised and proud that so many, 43 per cent, said yes! It's a truly heart-warming reminder of how caring our city really is.

This is also allied to new forms of place-making, through which Liverpool's entrepreneurial spirit, generated through its relational trade engagements with the global economy, particularly of the past, is celebrated as a means to produce Liverpool's future, whilst also invoking further historical narratives about the city (see also *Figures 5.5 and 5.6*):

I like to think quite a lot about the history of the city and where the city positioned itself; when they built this city, the people that built this city, this building and the Town Hall and St George's. They were making a statement, they were saying 'well here we are, this is Liverpool; it's glorious, it's massive, you just come and invest in it'. 40 per cent of the world's trade came through this port; we didn't look backwards! Our forefathers didn't build a pokey little room and say 'come and invest in our city'; it wasn't mealy-mouthed. It was saying 'we are Liverpool; this is our future, this is us' and they were making a statement, and that's what we have to do, we don't have to be shy about where we are and who we are.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Cllr Steve Munby, interview.

<sup>85</sup> Cllr Roz Gladden, interview.



**Figure 5.5:** The Pier Head, a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Source: Author, 2017).



**Figure 5.6:** Liverpool Town Hall (Source: Author, 2017).

Such developments have persuaded Anderson to argue that “Liverpool’s best days are still ahead” (cited in *Liverpool Echo*, 2015c: n.p.), whilst Deputy Mayor Councillor Nick Small claimed in interview:

Everyone wants Liverpool to do well, everyone’s in Liverpool’s corner. We need to take advantage of that – I think that’s the biggest thing that’s changed since the 1980s;

people want this city to do well, people are taking another look at this city and what it stands for.<sup>86</sup>

This emergent discourse reflects the aggressive place-marketing strategies of the city, and speaks to new relational political identities within national and international politics, where undefined outsiders are claimed to be re-thinking what the city stands for in ways that are oppositional to those identities that were discussed in Chapter 2. This seems an apparent paradox when contrasted with the disaster politics invoked earlier in this chapter, yet supports work which notes how city administrations draw upon attachments to place in order to justify economic development (Harvey, 1985; Leitner, 1990). It also shows how crisis is mobilised to re-shape political identities (Fuller and West, 2017). Austerity urbanism is, therefore, highly situated and is dependent here upon the malleability of the scouse identity to re-frame what austerity means and prescribe the means to resolve it.

#### 5.4.2 *Challenging Protest, Flanking Manoeuvres*

The actualisation and foreclosure of possibilities for anti-austerity is also shaped by the council's effective sidelining of individuals or organisations which it deems 'politically motivated' and critical of its wider agenda, a theme inspired by New Labour discourse (Raco, 2003). While the literature on the post-political is less adept at accounting for challenges emerging from below (Nolan and Featherstone, 2015), it can be instructive for illustrating how consensus within austerity urbanism is framed and imposed from above, where those willing to cooperate within circumscribed parameters are rewarded and those who are considered 'deviant' (Cooke and Kothari, 2001), troublesome or 'counter-productive' (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012), or as having 'vested interests' (Haughton *et al.*, 2016), are excluded from the debate. However, North *et al.* (2017) observe that the post-political city is never fully realised and that consensus is repeatedly re-enacted and disrupted at a number of scales. It is also pertinent to note that the techno-managerial discourse is inherently political, and that cities will always make claims to inclusiveness. Nonetheless, at least some of the strategies of depoliticisation discussed in the post-politics literature are evident here, such as the way in which conflict is carefully choreographed to silence activists and fragment local opposition (Swyngedouw, 2011).

It is also worth acknowledging that, where political opportunity structure identifies divisions between elite groups as providing opportunities for leverage (Tarrow, 1998), the dominance of the council by Labour (in addition to opposition parties who are accepting of the need to maintain budgetary discipline) denies space for effective disruption or for antagonism to be expressed or heard. This is despite the fact that Labour councillors are split on how to engage

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<sup>86</sup> Cllr Nick Small, interview.

with local anti-austerity movements, with some left-leaning councillors expressing sympathy and later cooperating with Momentum,<sup>87</sup> in contrast to the confrontational stance taken by the mayor.<sup>88</sup> This more easily allows the council to establish consensus within its techno-managerialist framework, where the notion of ‘playing politics’ is a recurrent theme used to discredit campaigners (a ruse to the subversive revolutionary tactics of Militant) and discursively exclude critical parties from the debate, while the ‘genuine’ ones are invited to offer ‘pragmatic’ interventions into austerity governance. In one such example, Joe Anderson responded to library campaigners fighting for a “publicly run library service with properly trained library staff”<sup>89</sup> with the comment that

those campaigners don’t understand the full financial facts [...] they get me frustrated, but I’d rather just forget about them to be frank. We were already talking to people who wanted to find a solution. What I wasn’t prepared to do was talk to people who were simply trying to play politics with the issue, and setting an illegal budget up. The genuine ones, that ones that really campaigned to save the libraries, offered us solutions, offered to work with us, offered us pragmatic ways to try and save the libraries and to them I’m grateful. The communities should be really proud of those people. A lot of people, the decent people in the city, understand why we have to go about doing things in a certain way.<sup>90</sup>

In ways reminiscent of the ‘bolshie’, robust Liverpoolian politics discussed in Chapter 2, Councillor Jane Corbett notes that the mayor has established a normative benchmark for those concerned with austerity, to ensure that “that anti-austerity mantra goes somewhere useful and makes a difference, rather than going into hot air”.<sup>91</sup> ‘Useful’, however, is defined as electing to volunteer for, or take over, a council service in ways which are consistent with the techno-managerial discourse, rather than expressing any form of antagonism.<sup>92</sup> Activists, or the “usual suspects”<sup>93</sup>, were positioned as unrepresentative and disruptive, and accused of silencing the voiceless whose “valuable contribution” was effectively “drowned out”.<sup>94</sup> Councillor Corbett furthered that:

I can remember some hard-left guys being [at a consultation] and a couple of people that are new to campaigning were thinking ‘yeah, they’ve got a point here’ [on an illegal budget]. I thought ‘this is dangerous now’, cos I know what it’s like when

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<sup>87</sup> Momentum is a self-described grassroots campaigning network which evolved out of Jeremy Corbyn’s 2015 Labour leadership campaign, and seeks to support the Labour Party under his leadership. Momentum was active in Liverpool, albeit in a nascent form during the research period.

<sup>88</sup> Field notes (17/08/16).

<sup>89</sup> *Sefton Park Save the Libraries* campaign, leaflet, published November 2014.

<sup>90</sup> Joe Anderson on *Radio City Talk*, 10/11/14.

<sup>91</sup> Cllr Jane Corbett, interview.

<sup>92</sup> Field notes (various).

<sup>93</sup> Cllr Jane Corbett, interview.

<sup>94</sup> Cllr Roz Gladden, interview.

people get caught up in the hard-left; they're chewed up and they're spat out. They're just fodder.<sup>95</sup>

This degree of local presence and fear of the 'hard-left' is a particular Liverpudlian manifestation in the way that it penetrates senior political thinking, and has a deep emotional history which resonates in the city. According to councillors, this spectre still looms over democratising processes:

I came to the really sad conclusion that you can't really communicate *en masse* in Liverpool [...] We had lots of meetings all over the place, and we got absolutely lambasted! Not by the majority of people but by certain individuals, it was the old Militant-type thing. Sadly there were other people there who had something really valuable to say, and they just shut up straight away because they didn't have a loud enough voice and that was really sad.<sup>96</sup>

Such comments are also in keeping with the views of Haughton *et al.* (2016), who observed that competing bodies tussle over the right to represent the local community as a whole, particularly for the most marginalised who are considered to be voiceless. Councillors argue that campaigns need to be conducted in the "right way"<sup>97</sup>, such as in the campaign to save the Sure Start centres, where antagonism was directed towards the national Conservative Party rather than the local council, and was subsequently met with approval by Labour councillors who supported their demonstrations.<sup>98</sup> This follows the findings of Fuller and West (2017), who cite Birmingham City Council's framing of austerity resistance as selfish negativity; the 'right' campaigns are invited to question how the pot is divided, but must accept the underlying techno-managerialist framework which is dictated.

LCC also argued that it had "consulted and engaged widely with people about the financial challenges facing the city"<sup>99</sup> within five public consultations over the library closures which took place. Each opened with the assertion that the LCC wanted to "listen to your ideas on how we can mitigate against the impact of library closures".<sup>100</sup> In their 2014 Library Review, the council concluded:

Some individuals were not happy about the idea of closing libraries or reducing provision. However, the majority of the 150 or so attendees understood the financial position that Liverpool City Council is in and were respectful and constructive although clearly unhappy with the situation.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Cllr Jane Corbett, interview.

<sup>96</sup> Cllr Roz Gladden, interview.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Field notes (28/02/15). See also p. 156.

<sup>99</sup> Liverpool City Council (2014c).

<sup>100</sup> Field notes (25/09/14).

<sup>101</sup> Liverpool City Council (2014c).

However, although the ostensible objective was to empower local residents, the consultation functioned more as a mechanism to stifle dissent and to ensure that grievances around the potential library closures did not spiral into more universalising demands for change and that the prevailing techno-managerialist framework would be maintained (Haughton *et al.*, 2016). This was achieved by advancing an emphasis on ‘explaining to’ rather than ‘consulting with’ audiences, and discursively framing budgetary logics only in relation to market values (Fuller and West, 2017). As one councillor acknowledged, “You’ve got to go through a consultation period, you’re managing expectation.”<sup>102</sup> This democratic deficit was evidenced with two of the three panellists representing the council in the consultations being professional officers rather than elected representatives, and field notes reflected that

participants accused the council of not wanting to open up to broader public debate, particularly with regards to whether the library budget should be cut at all. This was widely supported within the room. The mood was widely one of anger, as the consultations were accused of being a “fait accompli”, a “sham” and a “waste of time”, since the decision to make the cuts *and* of which libraries to close had already been decided. As it became apparent that the council officers were intent on defending their own proposals to the hilt, and that the *only* ‘consultation’ they were seeking to engage in was one which recognised the inevitability of the £2.5 million cut to the library budget at its outset, there was a palpable sense of frustration and anger.<sup>103</sup>

The problem is that politicians start from a different place to us. They are looking for solutions within the constraints of government policy. When it's the policy that needs to change. They ask us to come up with solutions without listening when we do.<sup>104</sup>

Anti-austerity campaigners accused the council of being uncooperative, lacking transparency and belittling activists rather than attempting to engage in dialogue.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, consultation is more likely to alienate rather than empower communities if it does not lead to an improvement in material conditions (Raco, 2003). Rather, the consultations conducted by LCC appeared to be a means to demonstrate receptiveness to public opinion, whilst also constituting an attempt to broadcast and cultivate public opinion rather than an engagement in democratic debate, as found in similar work on local authorities by Baiocchi (2016) and Haughton *et al.* (2016). This is further exemplified by efforts to craft consensus through online engagement, including the infographics campaign (2013, 2016) discussed in 5.3.1, and an online participatory budgeting simulator. In 2013-14, this simulator invited residents to state budgetary preferences and determine which services should be cut (see *Figures 5.7* and *5.8*). Yet, while it was possible

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<sup>102</sup> Cllr Barry Kushner, interview.

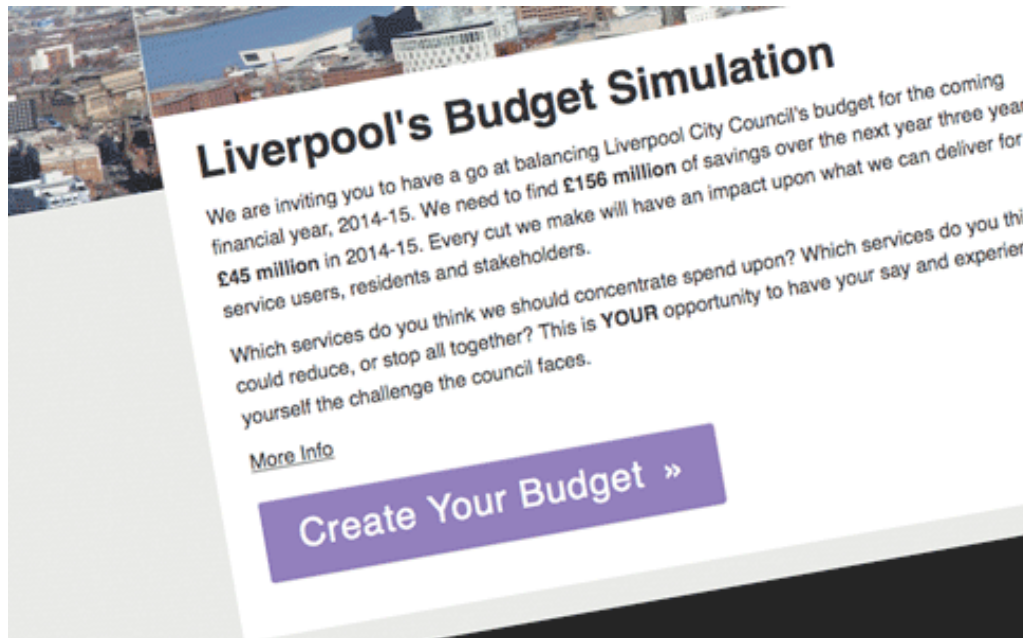
<sup>103</sup> Field notes (06/10/14); 52 per cent of respondents disagreed with the proposal to reduce services and 85 per cent said it was “very important” to have a community library in the area where they lived (Liverpool City Council, 2014c). Despite this, the council remained undeterred in cutting the budget.

<sup>104</sup> *Sefton Park Save the Libraries* campaign, Letter to John Keane (Head of Libraries), Re: Consultation on future of Liverpool Libraries, published 21/10/14.

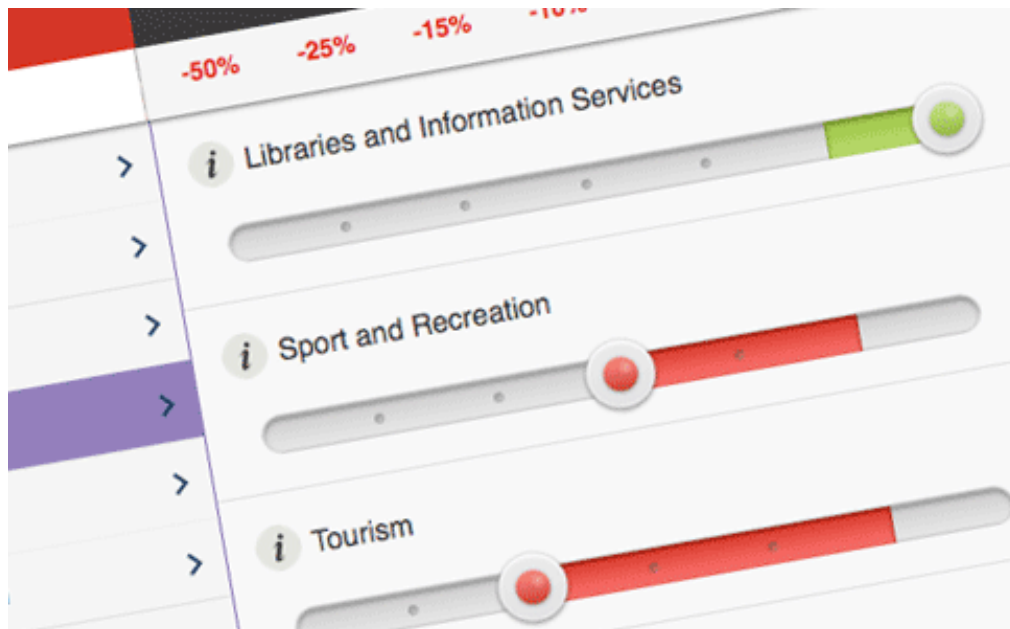
<sup>105</sup> Field notes (06/10/14).



to maintain or even increase the budget for specific services, this would have to come at the expense of others. In 2016, the simulator re-appeared to ask whether citizens would support a potential referendum for a 10 per cent increase in council tax. Mayor Anderson explained that “this is not a gimmick, but a serious attempt to engage council taxpayers in not only understanding the financial state we’re in, but have a say in what we can do, or should do.”<sup>106</sup>



**Figure 5.7:** Liverpool City Council Budget Simulator (Source: Liverpool City Council, 2013).



**Figure 5.8:** Distributing Cuts on the Budget Simulator (Source: Liverpool City Council, 2013).

<sup>106</sup> Joe Anderson (quoted in *Liverpool Echo*, 2016b: n.p.). There were over 10,000 visits to the budget simulator (Liverpool City Council, 2016c).



Cockburn's (1977) work highlighting the implication of citizens into the logics of techno-managerial decision-making processes can be applied here. This shows how elites are able to co-opt working-class demands into the 'logic of the possible', and helps to explain why, despite the paradoxical rise in participatory governance under austerity urbanism, early research suggests that participation often fails to drive policy decisions (Davies and Blanco, 2017; Penny, 2016). This is unsurprising in Liverpool where, in contrast to LCC's claims, consultation audiences incontrovertibly rejected the circumscribed budgetary logics presented, and argued for a more radical reframing which rejected the need for cuts in the first place. Adopting a Foucauldian perspective, Cooke and Kothari (2001) discuss 'participation as tyranny', whereby elites mobilise the language of community participation, but alienate that which challenges the *status quo*. It is therefore more likely that the consultations represented an advanced form of participatory technologies 'made safe' for the application of authority by elites (McQuarrie, 2015).

## **5.5 Towards a New Paradigm of Local Governance?**

The results hitherto noted how the local authority is a key agent in enacting austerity urbanism, and how this takes place through the harnessing of a particular interpretation of scouse identity, renewed place-making, and foreclosing anti-austerity politics at the local scale. This final section of this chapter discusses the possibilities and limits for emerging strategies to mitigate austerity.

### *5.5.1 Invest to Earn*

LCC's overarching strategy for mitigating austerity deploys the slogan 'Invest to Earn' (*Liverpool Echo*, 2015d). This entails a focus upon accelerated forms of urban entrepreneurialism whereby 'growing a way out of the deficit' involves actively creating conditions to attract private capital to the city, so that local economic growth and inward investment may plug the funding shortfall and stimulate job creation. This is encouraged by central government spending restrictions which discriminate between revenue and capital expenditure; the former is restricted to funding services, and is supported by the Revenue Support Grant (cut under austerity), while the latter supports capital investment which is instead being encouraged through austerity urbanism. This is illustrated in *Figure 5.9*, note also the framing of municipal budgeting in household terms, as discussed earlier.



**Figure 5.9:** Infographic: Capital versus Revenue Spending (Source: Liverpool City Council, 2014b).

Liverpool, argues one councillor, is “capital rich”,<sup>107</sup> which promotes opportunities for pursuing economic growth rather than alternatives. In the mid-1980s, the council focused on winning resources from central government to fund house-building and services, rather than on wealth creation which, today, councillors propose, will increase finances to provide the city with sufficient fiscal autonomy to pay for such services and much more besides (see also North, 2010). This is supported by the steady re-building of trust amongst local elites, who cite the mayor’s “more grown-up attitude towards central government” as providing the platform for local market stability (cited in Parkinson, 2016: 9). This type of advanced urban entrepreneurialism, within a context of austerity urbanism, is mirrored throughout cities across Europe where growth is the only bulwark against decline and market values are being

<sup>107</sup> Cllr Barry Kushner, interview.

increasingly ingested by local authorities (Fuller and West, 2017). In *Figure 5.10*, LCC attempts to communicate this strategy to the local populace. Councillors also explained:

We're trying to lock in growth into everything that we do; we've got to find ways of creating private sector-led growth. That means a whole business-friendly Liverpool agenda. There's a real need there to invest and to grow our way out of the deficit.<sup>108</sup>

We have to actually keep reinventing ourselves to keep getting a new market and keep getting new customers, and that's actually what keeps a city going. What is the competition doing? Let's compete! Let's do better services and better products. There's things you can do in 'Invest to Earn' that aren't confrontational, that we as a city should be proud of.<sup>109</sup>

Moreover, an economic development organisation leader (quoted in Parkinson, 2016: 15) claimed:

Because of [Joe Anderson's] style, Liverpool is now seen as a can-do city. Investors see it as on the move.

These quotes exemplify archetypal tropes from the urban entrepreneurialism catalogue, as the city is obliged to reproduce itself according to the demands of capital (Harvey, 1989; Leitner, 1990). *Place* is also an inescapable discourse permeating such narratives, as councillors draw upon ideas of place-making and identity to align the interests of Liverpool's residents with those of globally-mobile capital. In this instance, it can be argued that increased rhetoric against a Tory-led central government and fresh appeals to the scouse identity constitute nothing more than a Trojan horse pervaded by neoliberalism; ultimately, the local state is being shrunk and cities are re-directing their capacities to embracing the global economy upon which they increasingly depend (Peck, 2016, 2017a). This is coupled with the sale of assets to raise revenue, estimated to be valued at £35 million when up for sale in 2015-16 (*Liverpool Echo*, 2015e), despite evidence which demonstrates that such policies are socially regressive (such as the Right to Buy, see Jacobs and Manzi, 2013). Preventative measures, whilst welcome, are informed by the intent to "mitigate, rather than instigate, the need for public services in the future" (LGA, 2014, cited in Fuller, 2017: 13) in ways which direct state services to the most vulnerable and, in turn, erode those remaining elements of welfare universalism (Lowndes and Gardner, 2016). This is evidenced by local healthcare reform (Healthy Liverpool) which aims to responsibilise citizens for their own well-being (Healthy Liverpool, 2015). Yet, rather than complete withdrawal, such transformations represent a qualitative re-orientation of the local state, evidenced by the Mayor's touting for global investment in Shanghai (*Liverpool Echo*, 2015b). Labour councillors are also wary of the deepening spatial inequalities produced

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<sup>108</sup> Cllr Nick Small, interview.

<sup>109</sup> Cllr Gary Millar, interview.

through austerity urbanism where, despite notable city centre regeneration, the northern and peripheral areas of the city continue to be unproductive to capital and therefore chronically underfunded, with many communities ‘left behind’.<sup>110</sup>

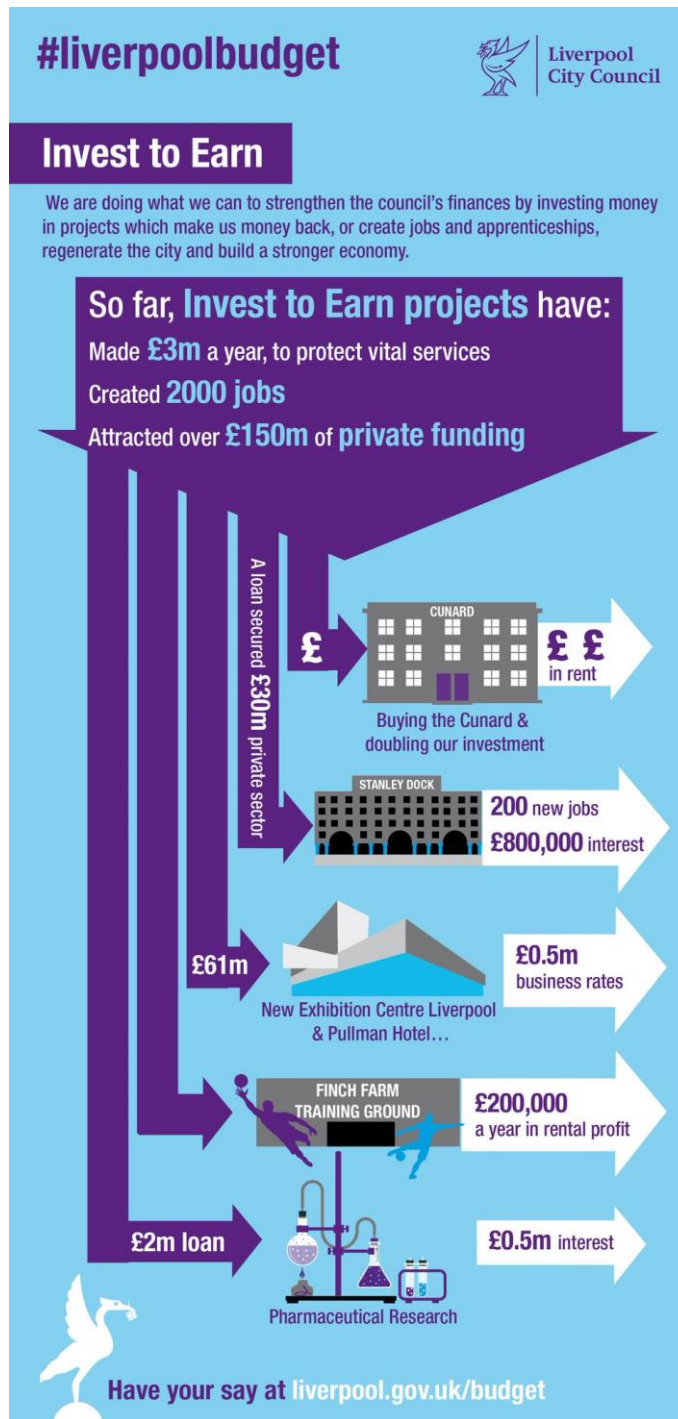


Figure 5.10: Infographic: Invest to Earn (Source: Liverpool City Council, 2016d).

<sup>110</sup> Interviews (various). See Chapter 2, supported by Frost and North (2013), Jones (2015), Sykes *et al.* (2013).

Rather than representing something new, perhaps austerity urbanism merely extends those processes of urban entrepreneurialism and variegated neoliberalism which are well-rehearsed in the literature. In the mid-1980s, recognising that the private sector was in retreat, Liverpool promulgated municipal socialism under the Marxist view that rejected urban entrepreneurialism as a dangerous compromise which simply enabled capitalism and began a flawed route for the left (Gyford, 1985; Mackintosh and Wainwright, 1987). However, the lessons learned following those defeats, combined with laws prohibiting budget deficits, and the return of the private sector to Liverpool,<sup>111</sup> have seemingly reinforced a local politics of ‘no alternative’. Where the Militant-era sought to defend the interests of workers at all costs, even to the detriment of local services (Lansley *et al.*, 1989), the contemporary Liverpool Labour strategy involves embracing the return of private capital and harnessing the opportunities for the benefit of the whole city, which is framed as inclusive to the entire city.<sup>112</sup> This is in contrast to the Militant approach of privileging the interests of manual workers which it saw as the ‘authentic’ voice of the working class, as discussed in Chapter 2. Finally, it remains to be seen what kinds of opportunities and threats will be posed to this model through the shifting political landscape towards both regional devolution to the Liverpool City Region and Brexit (North, 2017).

### 5.5.2 *Actually Existing Strategies of Anti-austerity*

Referring back to the New Economics Foundation’s (NEF) (2014) typology in *Figure 5.1*, local authorities can be seen to *adapt to*, *challenge* or *imagine alternatives to* austerity in ways which promote social justice. These methods expand the spectrum between complicit acquiescence and overt confrontation, and compel a more critical perspective about what LCC’s response entails. Indeed, councillors repeatedly make claims to LCC being an “anti-austerity council”<sup>113</sup> and approaching austerity in a radical way; this is a seeming paradox given the scale of cuts that the council has overseen. Rather than viewing austerity urbanism as all-encompassing – remembering that emphasising the power of structural forces limits our agency and forecloses the possibilities for alternatives (Featherstone, 2012, Gibson-Graham, 2006) – this final section of the chapter goes beyond gloomy accounts of austerial realism to make a case for more nuanced interpretations of austerity-inspired urban entrepreneurialism. This acknowledges the agency of the local authority to develop its ‘power to’ produce more transformative visions for social change beyond the logics of capital (Holloway, 2002). As Cllr Steve Munby (2015: 35-36) has argued:

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<sup>111</sup> Interviews (various). See Cllr Steve Munby (2015).

<sup>112</sup> Cllr Gary Millar, interview.

<sup>113</sup> Cllr Steve Munby, interview.

It is an inconvenient truth that something rather surprising is happening in our big cities that have been decimated by spending cuts. They haven't.

Unlike in Detroit (Peck, 2012), the lights have not gone out, and it is difficult to defend demoralising discourses in light of Liverpool's recent economic revival. Munby (2015) opines that the economic upsurge of the post-industrial city has tempered the worst effects of the cuts, whilst also surmising that it is the smaller, former industrial towns which are most susceptible to British austerity urbanism. It is pertinent, therefore, to examine whether Liverpool is a fertile testing ground for thinking through social justice approaches to managing austerity-blighted cities. Alternatives are emerging elsewhere in the UK, and some examples include: creative forms of local economic development; regional infrastructure projects; diverse economies-style projects such as time-banking (NEF, 2014); the transfer of services to social enterprises and local communities; and strategic attempts to access more local philanthropy from big business (Jones *et al.*, 2016). While the case for accelerated urban entrepreneurialism has been made, councillors argue that something more nuanced is taking place:

Within the Labour Party we need to look more about what Labour local government is doing. If you want to look at ways of developing alternatives to austerity, if you want to look at ways of how you do more with less, if you want to look at ways of how you promote economic growth in a fair and sustainable way, look to Labour local government.<sup>114</sup>

Indeed, Councillor Steve Munby's (2015) piece is illustrative here. Invoking Gramsci – “the ‘old is dying’ while the ‘new is yet to be born’” (Munby, 2015: 37) – the Labour Cabinet Member for Neighbourhoods argues that, in Liverpool, a new urban settlement is emerging in embryonic form. Moving beyond the New Public Sector Management approach launched by successive New Labour administrations, Munby states that LCC is creating new imaginative programmes based on problem-solving and devolving power to local communities, rather than the “old model's toxic combination of targets and competition [which] was expensive, unpleasant to work in and unresponsive to people” (Munby, 2015: 37). Suggesting that there has been a paradigm shift away from the entrepreneurial council since the 1990s,<sup>115</sup> this fresh approach is claimed to bring services closer to communities and reduce management costs while, critically, contesting the notion of service users as ‘consumers’. Instead, they are implicated and responsabilised into the co-production and design of services (see Penny, 2016, for equivalents in Lambeth Borough Council). These new forms of hybrid partnership involve promoting relationships at ward level between residents, councillors and council contractors, and re-orienting LCC to being a “creative service provider”<sup>116</sup> – indeed, the council's effective

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<sup>114</sup> Cllr Nick Small, interview.

<sup>115</sup> Cllr Steve Munby, interview.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

remunicipalisation of waste collection demonstrates the power of local authorities to contest the demands of austerity urbanism. Measures such as cutting pay are justified through an anti-managerial discourse, such as “the cuts must start at the top”<sup>117</sup>, whilst the handover of services and buildings to communities, and generally doing “more with less”<sup>118</sup>, echoes those discourses of ‘austerity as opportunity’ and is something that, “as radicals and as socialists, we should be perfectly comfortable with”.<sup>119</sup> These initiatives, however, remain couched within, and even embrace, the neoliberal logics of cost-cutting which are contested by local grassroots actors (see Chapter 6). Read cynically, there are dangers at play: assets such as buildings are reframed as costs, and have been accompanied by redundancies, a rise in volunteering (unpaid work), and further encroachments into working conditions. Nevertheless, these initiatives could have potential. Compared with the mid-1980s Labour strategy, where “most cities were in a terrible state and public services were in ruins”, Munby (2015: 36) proposes that a dual approach of Invest to Earn, plus innovation in local authorities, is the route to the successful promotion of alternatives to austerity at the municipal scale.

To this end, local authorities can evidently manage austerity in more or less progressive ways. For example, Barnet Borough Council (Conservative) was dubbed the ‘EasyCouncil’ following plans to allow its citizens to pay extra for additional council services, in ways which disrupted long-held principles of universalism (Whitfield, 2012). While LCC has not countenanced setting an illegal budget, it has established mechanisms to pursue social justice that exist *beyond* the cuts. This suggests a more far-reaching strategy than local anti-austerity groups give credit for (Chapter 6), and includes a Fairness Commission, whose priorities are the adoption of a living wage by the council, and the use of public-sector procurement to encourage local employment, develop social enterprise, and improve working conditions. This is allied to the Liverpool Social Charter (2015) which commits business signatories to a series of key principles and responsibilities in acting in the collective interests of the city (such as being green, supporting local communities, and prioritising the local economy). LCC is also developing a Liverpool Fair City Mark, which ranks businesses (gold, silver, bronze) in terms of their commitments to responsible business (apprenticeships, good terms and conditions, paying corporation tax).<sup>120</sup> Other examples include a Play Healthy Scheme which recognises the long-term outcomes and savings that can be accrued through preventative spending for children, alongside a Landlord Licensing Scheme and an ‘Advice on Prescription’<sup>121</sup> initiative.

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> Cllr Jane Corbett, interview.

<sup>121</sup> Liverpool Advice on Prescription Programme (APP) allows GPs to prescribe appointments to Citizens Advice services in Liverpool, rather than for drugs, in cases of diagnosed stress or depression.

These measures seek to reframe social spending as an investment rather than a cost (see NEF, 2014) and, in doing so, uphold non-market values and deploy alternative conceptions of the common good in ways which disrupt the neoliberal logics of austerity urbanism. This is also espoused through LCC's commitment to proportionate universalism,<sup>122</sup> which seeks to maintain the geographic distribution of services according to the principles of welfare universalism.

Therefore, it can be argued that LCC is doing as much as could be expected of it in difficult circumstances. The approach adopted is about managing the conflicting pressures of austerity urbanism, amid a commitment to economic growth, whilst developing a capacity to promote social justice within a competitive neoliberal environment. The chapter proposed that accelerated urban entrepreneurialism does not – in isolation – constitute a credible alternative, but this has been combined with mechanisms which halt the encroachment of neoliberal logics into all facets of urban governance, a counter-balance that councillors recognise is sometimes contradictory but nonetheless represents the most progressive option available.<sup>123</sup> As detailed in 5.4.2, the council has not always built productive relationships with those who seek to contest this framework. The mayor in particular has embodied a brash and aggressive persona all too familiar to Liverpoolian politics (Chapter 2). LCC could arguably engage with communities in a more bottom-up, less paternalistic and managerial manner, which might open up new forms of dialogue to engage citizens in a radically different way. This could be coupled with a diverse economies perspective which emphasises residents' 'power to', in ways which could further undermine (rather than facilitate) austerity implementation (see NEF, 2014). This might also be inspired by the emerging 'new municipal movement'. In Spain, four of the five biggest cities are currently governed by anti-austerity coalitions that emerged from the *Indignados* movement and its associated solidarity networks (Davies, 2017a), and gains have also been made in places as diverse as Naples, Valparaíso and Beirut. These developments have begun to realise more radical forms of co-production and commoning, and have sought to advance new ways of democratising local government through rethinking how power is built, transformed, and distributed (Russell and Reyes, 2017). While these movements are still nascent, they nonetheless highlight how radical possibilities for anti-austerity struggle may exist at the municipal scale, and show how power can be built from the bottom-up.

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Described by Cllr Frank Hont as "a brilliant scheme and "a win-win" (interview). See South Liverpool CAB (2017).

<sup>122</sup> Cllr Jane Corbett, interview.

<sup>123</sup> Interviews (various).



## **5.6 Conclusions**

This chapter adopted the conceptual framework of austerity urbanism to examine how LCC has responded to fiscal retrenchment. The chapter opened by making a case against dominant structuralist accounts which have portrayed cities as meekly implementing austerity measures uncontested (see Peck, 2012, 2016). LCC does utilise techno-managerialist discourses and displays some tendencies relating to ‘austrian realism’ (Davies and Blanco, 2017), but more nuanced processes are taking place. Forwarding poststructuralist interpretations, the chapter observed how the politics of austerity are discursively and materially ‘pulled down’ by LCC and (re)framed in place-specific ways. It is therefore suggested that austerity urbanism is a highly situated process that depends upon local institutional and non-institutional actors actively re-producing or contesting austerity logics within place-frames in order to craft legitimacy at the municipal scale. The chapter has provided several insights by interpreting austerity urbanism in Liverpool through a geographical lens (Fuller and West, 2017). First, there is an active (re)politicisation of austerity in Liverpool, where the Labour council has adopted a rhetorically antagonistic-strategically cooperative relationship with successive Conservative-led central governments. Secondly, austerity is being embraced by the municipal left as a transformative catalyst for social change in ways that represent a shift in local government discourse. Thirdly, austerity urbanism relies upon making fresh appeals for place-making and mobilising place-based political identities to legitimate retrenchment. Fourthly, such claims to place are also central to cultivating consensus at the local scale. Finally, local authorities incontrovertibly retain the agency to pursue social justice, where Invest to Earn is accompanied by more nuanced strategies which can seek to disrupt the functioning of austerity urbanism within a given city. These strategies suggest potential for creating alternatives to austerity locally, albeit severe constraints still exist. The novel contribution of this chapter is to show that situated analyses are clearly productive in de-emphasising the all-encompassing logics of neoliberalism and determining the possibilities (and limits) for progressive direction in the current conjuncture, where austerity discourses are never fully coherent and hegemony is never complete (Hall, 1998; Newman, 2014). This means that one must extend the vocabulary of what might necessarily be considered ‘anti-austerity’, and to take seriously those voices from below which articulate alternative paths of direction. It is to those that this thesis now turns.

## Chapter Six

### The Geographies of ‘Actually Existing Anti-Austerity Contestation’

#### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter answers calls to engage critically with the multiple articulations of contentious politics ‘from below’ that are emerging in response to austerity (Featherstone, 2015; Nolan and Featherstone, 2015). This develops a more nuanced understanding of how the crisis is being (re)politicised and how contestation is narrated and enacted in the current conjuncture, rather than viewing resistance as simply ‘reactive’, ‘localised’ or ‘defensive’ (Featherstone, 2015). Contrary to post-political readings (Swyngedouw, 2014), this chapter shows how spatially-situated actors and practices are integral to shaping this political landscape and re-working the terms upon which austerity urbanism is enacted. This means that local forms of ‘actually existing contestation’ are deeply implicated within, and constitutive of, Liverpool’s particular political imaginary, and that such diverse spatialities help to shape the possibilities and limits for anti-austerity politics locally (Chapter 2; Featherstone, 2008). This chapter therefore makes three contentions. First, critiques of austerity and proposed alternatives in Liverpool respond to certain ‘place frames’ (Martin, 2013), yet, concomitantly, do articulate broader relational political imaginaries. Secondly, these ‘assemblages’ of actually existing anti-austerity contestation mobilise distinct “action repertoires” (Tilly, 1986: 390) that reflect specific peculiarities of Liverpoolian strategies of resistance. Thirdly, grassroots resistance ultimately struggled to attain credibility during the period of research, in part jostled out by dominant elite discourses of austere realism and urban entrepreneurialism – which maintained legitimacy – and owing to a multitude of structural and strategic dysfunctions which hindered the assemblage. Nonetheless, engaging with ostensibly unproductive expressions of political activity can still illuminate how resistance may reshape political terrain and reconfigure political and spatial imaginaries (Featherstone, 2003, 2005). The chapter therefore forwards a novel ‘more-than-cuts’ approach which demonstrates that anti-austerity cannot be contained within a single analytical frame; it is mobilised and re-worked in diverse and situated ways, assuming different meanings according to the circumstances.

Section 6.2 provides a brief theoretical overview which makes the case for critically rethinking the diverse geographies of actually existing contestation; 6.3 locates anti-austerity politics practiced within the city; and 6.4 examines anti-austerity critiques and proposed alternatives to austerity in Liverpool. Section 6.5 explores the strategies and tactics of grassroots anti-austerity actors within the city, and finally 6.6 discusses the potentialities and limits of this resistance and concludes that, despite ostensible ‘failure’, a more nuanced reading of anti-

austerity opens up different possibilities for analysing the myriad outcomes of contentious politics, which are elaborated upon in Chapter 7.

## 6.2 Towards a 'More-Than-Cuts' Approach

The last ten years has been framed by political austerity (Chapter 3; Featherstone, 2016), and austere realism at the municipal scale (Davies and Blanco, 2017; Peck, 2017a). In response, the geography and planning literature has experienced a burgeoning of post-political interpretations of recent forms of contentious politics, and identified the foreclosure of anti-austerity politics at a variety of scales (Decreus *et al.*, 2014; Haughton *et al.*, 2016; Mouffe, 2013; Swyngedouw, 2011; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). Others have similarly taken inspiration from a focus on anti-politics (Clarke, 2012, 2015; Mair, 2013). Drawing upon the writings of Swyngedouw (2007, 2009, 2011, 2014), Rancière (2010) and Žižek (2002), such accounts perceive the contemporary 'post-political' condition as an elite strategy in which radical antagonism is replaced by a techno-managerial concern with establishing consensus, which is achieved through marginalising and excluding uninvited dissent from mainstream political debate. The implication is the denial of the possibilities for alternative socio-political interpretations, and the concretisation of neoliberal ideology by posing market-driven economic rationalities as the only legitimate societal arrangement (Swyngedouw, 2009). In turn, social movements become 'accounted for'; their presence in civil society is heard but is ineffective, thereby reinforcing the credibility and supposed transparency of liberal democracy (Swyngedouw, 2014). The previous chapter illustrated how technologies of depoliticisation are integral to consensus-seeking strategies for austere realism, and post-politics therefore casts many expressions of political activity as unproductive and unable to disrupt this consensus, which contributes to the continuation of 'zombie neoliberalism' (Peck, 2010).

However, other geographers have sought to demonstrate that while the post-political can fruitfully expose elite depoliticisation strategies from above, it is "less adept at accounting for the actually existing forms of contestation" that have emerged to contest austerity from below (Nolan and Featherstone, 2015: 351; Featherstone, 2015). Indeed, various protest movements have testified to re-politicising the crisis in ways which expose the limits of this explanatory framework (Featherstone *et al.*, 2015), where post-politicisation is a contingent and contextual process (rather than a condition) that is constantly being disrupted and reshaped at multiple scales (North *et al.*, 2017; O'Callaghan *et al.*, 2014). It has been argued that elite strategies of depoliticisation are not necessarily new (Nolan and Featherstone, 2015), and that post-political perspectives overstate the extent to which neoliberalism is all-encompassing and, conversely, underplay the role of social movements in challenging neoliberal 'business as usual' (North *et al.*, 2017). The post-political narrowly and arbitrarily defines what it considers to be 'real'

politics capable of disrupting this impasse, and thereby discourages an engagement with the myriad grassroots challenges that may constitute the germ of an alternative to neoliberalism (Larner, 2014), thus contributing to a politically disempowering analysis which prefigures how movements will fail rather than how they can be built up (Beveridge and Koch, 2016). This has spurred calls for more sympathetic interpretations of bottom-up political activity which engage with those actually existing forms of contestation on their own, less prescriptive, terms (Featherstone *et al.*, 2015; Hadjimichalis and Hudson, 2014; North *et al.*, 2017).

This is a welcome intervention in a debate which has hitherto adopted a primarily capital-centric lens – for example, studying capital flows (Harvey, 2010) or the scales of fiscal disciplining (Peck, 2012) – to the marginalisation of ongoing forms of contention, which are lamented as ‘reactive’, ‘localised’ or ‘defensive’, and supposedly indicative of the political left’s failure to capture a counter-hegemonic moment (Dean, 2015; Worth, 2013; Panitch *et al.*, 2011; Winlow *et al.*, 2015). Yet, responses to austerity have been underplayed or simply ignored (Featherstone, 2015) while engagements with those actually existing forms of contestation have proved productive for assessing grassroots responses and alternatives to neoliberalisation (Arampatzi, 2017a; North and Huber, 2004), in ways which suggest that there are many challenges to austerity (see also Featherstone, 2015). These analyses are inspired by Foucauldian-infused perspectives which view resistance and domination as intertwined (Sharp *et al.*, 2000), such that neoliberal austerity takes place on contested terrain and is re-negotiated through ongoing struggles, rather than imposed on irrevocably post-political landscapes (Featherstone *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, since people experience austerity in a variety of ways (as consumers of local services, tenants, welfare claimants, taxpayers and more), emerging struggles will likely coalesce around a heterogeneity of political issues and identities, perhaps not always explicitly linked to austerity (Seymour, 2014). This necessitates engaging with those actually existing forms of contestation that are emerging, and consideration of how the crisis is being interpreted, addressed and contested in diverse ways (Featherstone, 2003, 2008). This must be allied with a closer inspection of the less overt, ‘heroic’ (North *et al.*, 2017), or ‘successful’ (Zamponi, 2012) forms of contentious politics, particularly those that take place beyond the direct observation of power-holders (Scott, 1985, 1990; Theodossopoulos, 2014). This disrupts the binary between overt confrontation and complicit acquiescence to cuts, and emphasises movements’ agency to re-work the terms of austerity (Hall *et al.*, 2013) and to develop their ‘power to’ produce different political imaginaries and expressions (Holloway, 2002) which, in turn, open up, rather than foreclose, the possibilities for alternatives (Bayırbağ *et al.*, 2017; Featherstone *et al.*, 2015; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014).

Finally, it is important to consider how social movements generate political agency and the capacity to mobilise, since the presence of grievances alone is insufficient (Tarrow, 1998).

Scholars of social movement theory (SMT) have variously posited that collective action occurs when either resources (McCarthy and Zald, 1977) or political opportunities (Fainstein and Fainstein, 1985; McAdam, 1982) are present, yet it is necessary to understand how movement frames are constructed, contested and reworked 'in action' (Snow and Benford, 1988; Tarrow, 1988). Geographers have also sought to affirm the importance of a variety of spatialities in shaping political activity (Davies, 2012; Jessop *et al.* 2008; Leitner *et al.*, 2008; Nicholls *et al.*, 2013), where concepts such as place, space, scale and networks are not mere backdrops, but themselves formative of political struggle (Featherstone, 2003, 2005). Indeed, research has shown how austerity has been contested through particular geographies of crisis where, alongside elite mobilisations of place-based discourses (Chapter 5), the nation, for example, has been harnessed as a significant scale to articulate exclusionary forms of opposition (Featherstone, 2015; Ince *et al.*, 2015; Knight, 2013; Theodossopoulos, 2014), although grassroots struggles over austerity have simultaneously been generative of new political identities and solidarities (Arampatzi, 2017a; Featherstone, 2015). Engaging with bottom-up struggles on their own terms can therefore provide a more sensitive understanding of the ways in which differently placed struggles are conducted, and how places and political identities relate to austerity urbanism. This responds to Martin's (2003, 2013) call to engage with the actual socio-spatial relations that movement participants practice, rather than those spatialities that the analyst observes or seeks to privilege (see also Jessop *et al.*, 2008). Hence, building on arguments made in Chapters 2 and 5, this chapter promotes place as a key mobilising discourse for local anti-austerity politics, where place-based political imaginaries are understood as emerging from the networks between, and legacies of, different struggles, rather than being the product of territorially bounded identities (Davies and Featherstone, 2013).

This chapter therefore shows how critically engaging with the diverse geographies of actually existing anti-austerity contestation opens up fruitful avenues for thinking through the practices of, and possibilities and limits for, anti-austerity resistance. The more-than-cuts approach is further defined, thus opening up an analysis which reads anti-austerity politics in Liverpool as messy, situated and contextual. As outlined in Chapter 3, a more-than-cuts approach attends to actually existing forms of contestation from the bottom-up, and examines the possibilities and limits of anti-austerity politics as they are actually practiced. This entails more sympathetic and sensitive interpretations of political activity which result from bottom-up engagement with the anti-austerity movement in the city, observing it on its own terms. The approach argues that such readings can produce more genuinely politically productive outcomes than blanket theories such as post-politics might imply. Observing local political activity in this way also opens up avenues for understanding the myriad ways in which people understand, and might oppose, austerity through a heterogeneity of political or social issues (discussed in 6.3). While

a more-than-cuts approach has considered how LCC can simultaneously reject and embrace austerity politics as both a threat to its very existence and as a radical opportunity to reconfigure itself, this framework will now turn to consider how local grassroots groups and organisations at once reject austerity yet, concurrently, seize the conjuncture as a moment to craft new political identities and solidarities in ways which can be productive towards envisaging alternatives to the current socio-political order.

Specific to this chapter, the more-than-cuts approach shows how conceptions of austerity and proposed alternatives depend upon highly localised interpretations, but which are intertwined with broader relational political imaginaries. This is practiced across a self-identified 'coalition' or assemblage of anti-austerity forces gathered primarily at the city level, but which seek to challenge austerity politics as operating across a series of temporal and spatial scales. The further contribution of more-than-cuts is to therefore assess the dynamics through which struggles over local service closures – such as libraries – may become universalised into wider demands for social change, situated within local, national and even global contexts. Finally, the more-than-cuts framework is productive for arriving at more sensitive interpretations of Liverpudlian resistance in the extent to which activists can be considered to have reconfigured political and spatial imaginaries. Given that grassroots resistance struggled to attain popular legitimacy during the research period, less engaged methodologies may tend to emphasise the unproductive nature of such anti-austerity politics. Rather, the more-than-cuts approach allows us to 'get at' ostensibly unproductive expressions of political activity in ways which can better conceive of the complexity of these social relations, and can in turn suggest alternative ways of reading the political landscape.

### **6.3 Locating Anti-Austerity Politics in Liverpool**

Assemblage is a useful spatial tool to conceptualise how anti-austerity politics are practiced in Liverpool. While a fuller discussion is beyond the purview of this chapter (see Davies, 2012), assemblage essentially describes how social formations generate as "aggregates of objects and people" which "temporarily cohere at certain times, before dispersing again" (Davies, 2012: 276). The key contributions for social movements are that assemblage stresses the dynamism and instability of movement processes that occur across space and time; agency is distributed unevenly across the assemblage so that different actors experience power at different times; and assemblage implies emergence rather than any fixed or complete formation (Davies, 2012; McFarlane, 2009). A useful concept aimed at deconstructing global/local dichotomies, assemblages are relational and constituted through the convergence of people, materials, imaginations and discourses operating through various spatio-temporal scales. Assemblage theory thus explains how particular 'anti-austerity' relations cohered and then dissipated

within Liverpool, drawing upon shared interpretations of the distinct political imaginary as a major node for mobilisation (Chapter 2). In the spirit of assemblage theory, the chapter therefore adopts the past tense to describe these dynamic social relations, which are constantly in flux. While the reader should refer to *Appendix A* for outlines of the specific anti-austerity organisations,<sup>124</sup> the remainder of this section discusses how these groups converged to constitute an assemblage.

During the research period, anti-austerity in Liverpool was practiced through a self-identified 'coalition' or assemblage of forces gathered primarily at the city scale. There was no singular hegemonic individual or group; instead, this assemblage combined extant left identities and groupings within the city, acting in tandem with a collection of 'new' activists. Following Seymour (2014), there was a plurality of struggles and activists might participate in one or more campaigns, meaning that the holistic coalition acted in horizontal, albeit fragmented, ways, with no effective leadership. Viewing how these different groups coordinated as a whole is integral to observing how both solidarity and conflict were negotiated, and how certain actions and demands were evaluated. While there was no clear, unifiable strategy or series of demands held across the assemblage, some shared understandings of austerity were present, which allowed solidarities to form and the assemblage to function. This assemblage was constituted through different emergent forms; individuals, groups and organisations, institutions, events and ideas, which are each considered in the chapter. *Table 6.1* reminds the reader of the different active groups constituting the assemblage.

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<sup>124</sup> As discussed in Chapter 4, individuals operating within this coalition are variously referred to as activists, campaigners, and movement participants or actors. Similarly, this assemblage of anti-austerity organisations is variously termed the movement, the coalition, or the constellation.

Type of Organisation	Name of Group
Formal Political Parties	Socialist Party Socialist Workers Party Left Unity Green Party
Cross-Party Coalitions	Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC)
Trade Union Organisations	Unite the Union Unite CASA 567 Community Branch National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) Liverpool Trades Council
Neighbourhood Organisations	Old Swan against the Cuts Sefton Park Anti-Cuts South Liverpool Against Poverty Reclaim
Campaigns to Save Local Services	Libraries Sure Start children's centres Adult Social Care Mental health provision ( <i>Save our Sanity</i> ) Liverpool Women's Hospital
Other Political Organisations Contributing to 'Anti-Austerity'	Liverpool IWW Love Activists (anarchist direct action group) Liverpool against the Cuts (umbrella organisation) Merseyside People's Assembly Against Austerity (local branch of a national organisation) Momentum Merseyside Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network Unite Against Fascism
Other Political Campaigns Associated with 'Anti-Austerity'	No More Blacklisting Hillsborough Justice Campaign

**Table 6.1:** Observed Anti-Austerity Organisations and Campaigns in Liverpool (June 2014 – February 2016).

Some groups were primarily coordinated through a loose umbrella organisation, entitled *Liverpool against the Cuts* – while others did not participate – and also, temporarily, through the *Merseyside People's Assembly Against Austerity*. Most groups would range from five to twenty 'members' who, in cases outside of the formal political parties, were defined as a regular participant rather than necessarily holding formal membership. This coalition formed solidarities with other social justice campaigns ongoing in the city, such as the No More Blacklisting and Hillsborough Justice Campaigns. In addition to these groups, other components of the assemblage included concerned service users and residents (e.g. present at service consultations), third sector organisations, local public opinion, local media, and oppositional elite discourses (Chapter 5), as well as countless other forms of (anti-)austerity discourse producers. This assemblage was also relationally intertwined with forces operating on both the national and supra-national scales. The value of assemblage is to demonstrate how the complexion of the movement is shaped by myriad variables, and to help understand how



and why different relations converged, to the extent that a form of network operated despite some groups never cooperating with one another. To that end, the question remains; what drew them together? The following section uncovers how this depended upon collective understandings of austerity articulated through particular scalar lenses. Sections 6.5 and 6.6 return to address how this contestation actually functioned.

## **6.4 Grassroots Discourses of Anti-Austerity**

This section explores how austerity is being (re-)politicised from below, and the competing discourses through which this contestation is articulated. Contra post-political theory, the results show how anti-austerity groups are productive in reshaping the political landscapes upon which austerity urbanism is actualised. Section 6.4.1 outlines the broader political articulations through which activists make sense of scalar practices of austerity, while 6.4.2 discusses how anti-austerity is 'localised' through particular place frames (Martin, 2013). Finally, 6.4.3 considers the discursive shaping of alternatives to austerity.

### *6.4.1 Making Sense of Austerity*

First, anti-austerity politics in Liverpool identify austerity as something more-than-cuts in ways which refute post-political assertions that resistance is merely reactive, localised, or unproductive. Instead, activists articulate more universalistic critiques that seek to re-politicise austerity, to deconstruct elite framings of crisis, and to disrupt the smooth implementation of austerity urbanism. This is evidenced by the plurality of different actors and groups engaged in anti-austerity struggle within the locale (6.3) and the breadth of their activity,<sup>125</sup> which included, through Liverpool against the Cuts (hereafter LATC), addressing myriad issues not always exclusively related to the city, such as opposing: fracking, the renewal of the Trident nuclear deterrent and immigration controls; and support for Scottish independence and the ongoing struggles in Palestine. This was combined with the articulation of broader critiques which acknowledge a particular scalar politics in which austerity – contra a temporary 'belt-tightening' exercise to 're-balance the books' – is the vehicle through which neoliberal politics seeks to roll back the state, retrench welfare and permanently remove the final remnants of the social-democratic consensus (Chapter 3). Such critiques resonate with much of the critical literature on austerity imposition (Aalbers, 2013; Blyth, 2013; Farnsworth, 2011; Peck, 2012; Seymour, 2014) in identifying a link between the construction of 'austerity' as a political discourse, an economic policy, and the material implication of 'cuts', and this composes much of the contemporary political left imaginary (Bramall, 2013). Such narrations therefore adopt a wider chronological lens to situate the politics of austerity within a broader historical shift

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<sup>125</sup> LATC monthly meetings, field notes (various), agendas (various).

within the trajectory of capitalism – “austerity is a policy of capitalism throughout the whole world”<sup>126</sup> – where the existing political settlement is at stake (Harvey, 2010). Austerity is therefore positioned as an elite strategy, or “political lie”,<sup>127</sup> to consolidate and intensify neoliberal ideology and “to enrich the 1 per cent at the expense of everybody else”,<sup>128</sup> as what was commonly described as ‘class war’:

Austerity represents the greatest con-trick ever perpetrated on the British working-class. This whole concept of austerity, which has been conjured up and used as a reason, as a lie, to justify the attacks which have been made on working-class living standards. It’s a ruthless, mendacious attack, to prop up a system which created the crisis in the first place. Driving down living standards, and increasing the wealth of the top 1 per cent.<sup>129</sup>

It’s not a temporary deviation from a norm that will be suspended once things are better. This is an attempt to permanently change the relationship between the state and the economy, and the relationship between the people and the state.<sup>130</sup>

Moreover, the “roll back” of social-democracy (Peck and Tickell, 2002: 384) was seen not only as an attack on welfarism per se, but as a fundamental re-working of ‘common sense’ (Gramsci, 1971; Hall *et al.*, 2013) and the neoliberal subjectification of the individual towards *homo economicus*; the expansion of economic rationalities to all aspects of human life (Read, 2009). Hence:

They want to see the end of the welfare state so it’ll take less of their income, and ideas like *The Spirit of ’45* – the idea that the better the quality of life of the people around me, the better my own quality of life – it’s not part of their thinking. It’s austerity; it’s the neoliberal agenda.<sup>131</sup>

Another activist claimed that “they’ve weakened people’s solidarity too; it’s an attack on communities and it’s all about ‘me, me, me’, individualism”.<sup>132</sup> This was a common theme throughout the research, and permeated anti-austerity politics in Liverpool; the notion of a particular politico-historical imaginary, characterised by a deep nostalgia for the post-war social-democratic state and the world it entailed, including tight-knit, working-class communities bonded by social solidarity and the support of universal, state-guaranteed rights (Srnicek and Williams, 2015). This chimes with Clarke’s (2004: 154) assertion that “people

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<sup>126</sup> Member of *Old Swan against the Cuts* (hereafter OSAC), interview.

<sup>127</sup> Member of LATC, interview.

<sup>128</sup> Member of OSAC, interview.

<sup>129</sup> Member of LATC, interview.

<sup>130</sup> Member of LATC, interview.

<sup>131</sup> Member of *Keep our NHS Public Merseyside*, interview. *The Spirit of ’45* is a 2013 documentary film by socialist director Ken Loach, and celebrates the post-war expansion of the welfare state in Britain, in particular the founding of the NHS, amid the prevailing consensus for state provision and welfare universalism.

<sup>132</sup> Member of LATC, interview.

continue to view welfare states as part of the social and public fabric of life” (see also Bramall, 2013). Austerity is thus seen as an attack on the fundamental rights upon which the good society is based, and neoliberalism is identified as the class project responsible for the fragmentation and erosion of Liverpool’s working-class communities (see Chapter 2). Yet, in addition to capitalist restructuring at the global scale, activists identified the Conservative Party as representing the national political expression of this class dynamic:

In Britain it’s a clear project of the Conservative Party. The establishment: [their] concern is the reduction of taxes to the minimum level possible and the reduction of workers’ bargaining power. Their job is to increase profit and the only way to do that is to reduce taxes and to reduce workers’ bargaining power.<sup>133</sup>

In Liverpool, austerity as ‘class war’ is connected to particular place-based discourses which frame ‘the Tories’ as a force alien, and wholly antithetical, to the wider political imaginary of the city, and ‘the North’ more generally. From this perspective, the city itself is seen as being under attack, which is considered to be part of a broader historical class struggle owing to the Conservatives’ ideological, almost “ancestral”, dislike for Liverpool itself (Du Noyer, 2004: 175), and because of the city’s reputation for ‘fighting back’. This resurrects a series of tropes discussed in Chapter 2 which position the city in relation to national political processes:

I grew up in Liverpool in the ’80s which was a very difficult time. People in Liverpool have got a really good class consciousness and a good understanding of when we’re under attack. When you look at the history of the dockers’ strike, the support we gave to the miners’ strike, the Hillsborough Justice Campaign etc., we have got a history of standing up and being prepared to take that fight on.<sup>134</sup>

These cultural tropes are elaborated upon in Chapter 7, but for now it is concluded that while there was no completely fixed or bounded interpretation of austerity, there was a collective diagnosis which positioned the movement alongside those broader political left imaginaries outlined in Chapter 3, and served as a reference point for uniting previously disparate forces across the assemblage, many of which had been dormant for some time.<sup>135</sup> This shared interpretation also proved a key mechanism for defining who the coalition would include; for example, participants were encouraged to oppose *all* service cuts, and a Conservative Party-sympathiser – who hypothetically might oppose a specific cut but remain supportive of the austerity agenda – would most certainly not have been welcomed.<sup>136</sup> This framing allowed participants collectively to make sense of austerity and their own relational political identity, and thus also served as a framework through which to define the terms of engagement and

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<sup>133</sup> Member of OSAC, interview.

<sup>134</sup> Member of LATC, interview.

<sup>135</sup> Many individuals reported having long histories of political activism in the city, but discussed not having been politically active for many years prior to 2010.

<sup>136</sup> Discussions with members of LATC, field notes (15/06/15).

incorporate new activists into the broader assemblage. This section therefore contends that activists deployed a more-than-cuts political imaginary which sought explicitly to transcend reactive or localised struggles, and contest elite framings from above, thereby reshaping the political landscapes upon which austerity urbanism is actualised. The chapter now turns to elaborate how these discourses performed locally.

#### 6.4.2 Localising Anti-Austerity

Research has shown how austerity has been contested through particular geographies of crisis which can be either exclusionary or generative of new political identities and solidarities (Arampatzi, 2017a; Featherstone, 2015; Theodossopoulos, 2014). This forces us to develop much richer accounts than even variegated austerity implies (Meegan *et al.*, 2014), to show how certain geographies become implicated within anti-austerity contestation; indeed, in a city which is argued to have a conceivably 'exceptional' political identity, and which attempts to promote itself as such (Chapter 2), it is integral to critically uncover those urban landscapes where austerity occurs (Fuller, 2017). The results show that anti-austerity critiques converged around a series of ostensibly 'local' and 'global' issues which could first be described as more-than-cuts and second, as responding to particular 'place frames' (Martin, 2013), thus showing how anti-austerity is mobilised and reworked in diverse and situated ways. Critically, the major target of contention was not the Conservative Government but LCC, which speaks to a number of peculiarities of the city (which will be more fully addressed in 6.5). This contention can be summarised through the lens of Fuller (2017), who cites two potential avenues of anti-austerity critique; either the failure of city authorities to ensure social justice through provision, or the failure of the market through which the local state is relying upon. In Liverpool, aimed predominantly at LCC, grievances hinged upon (1) the council's *strategies* for mitigating austerity, such as invest to earn (critiquing the market), and (2) the broader political shift of Liverpool Labour to the right (repudiating its ability to deliver social justice). These critiques were enacted through a plurality of struggles over seemingly disparate 'local' issues not always explicitly related to austerity (see Seymour, 2014). Some diverse examples include: critiquing the ongoing development of student accommodation;<sup>137</sup> picketing *Carillion* construction sites (in solidarity with the Blacklist Support Group) and supporting a number of other labour disputes;<sup>138</sup> opposing various service privatisations;<sup>139</sup> and campaigning against

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<sup>137</sup> Field notes (various); *Nerve* Magazine, Issue 26, May 2016.

<sup>138</sup> These included supporting the junior doctors' strikes, field notes (10/03/16); proposing a living wage for care workers, field notes (12/06/15); and picketing businesses which exploited zero-hours contracts, field notes (27/09/13).

<sup>139</sup> These included mental health services, field notes (11/10/14), and GP practices, field notes (26/01/16), as well as the transfer of libraries to the private-sector or community groups, field notes (various).

homelessness,<sup>140</sup> as well as for mobility rights within working-class neighbourhoods.<sup>141</sup> This evidences the extent to which the assemblage was productive in reshaping austerity landscapes in ways which do not resonate with structuralist interpretations. Picking up on (1), activists argued:

[Mayor] Anderson loves exporting himself at various business dinners. He's got it into his own head that if he looks after the wealthy then eventually Liverpool will explode into a metropolis of abundant wealth, and then they'll be able to take care of the masses.<sup>142</sup>

Most of the jobs being created are part-time jobs and zero-hour contracts. If they're actually only giving people a meaningless existence; putting them in poverty, making them use food banks, then that's not a solution, that's not an answer to the problems.<sup>143</sup>

There was a lot of money spent in Liverpool – Capital of Culture etc. – but that money tended to be spent in the inner-city tourist attractions; you didn't see that money going into areas like Knotty Ash and Kirkby and other areas outside of the city centre. All the resources that working-class people rely on – such as libraries, Sure Starts, nurseries etc. – are the things that are going, things that are invisible to the middle-class or the ruling class because they don't use those resources, but it's very visible to the working class in Liverpool.<sup>144</sup>

All over the waterfront is wonderful, and they say that 'Liverpool's on the up', 'Liverpool has put behind it all those turbulent years, the dark days' – you go down to L1 with all those tiled plazas and manicured lawns [but] a mile up the road [...] you've got more people on zero-hour contracts in Liverpool than most other cities in the UK, and the city is mainly run on students, hotels and betting shops. Unless there's industrial development, you end up with a vast pool of lousy paid labour with a very, very, rich tiny group at the top – it's like an oligarchy.<sup>145</sup>

Liverpool was therefore regularly portrayed as a city which had “sold its soul”<sup>146</sup> owing to the urban entrepreneurism and civic boosterism promoted by LCC, which has resulted in local culture, as well as the physical landscape, being redrawn to the demands of capital (Boland, 2010; Jones, 2015). Activists either struggled to make sense of, or take credibly, invest to earn strategies,<sup>147</sup> citing the council's “corrupt”, “neoliberal” or downright “incompetent” strategies for mitigating austerity urbanism.<sup>148</sup> This exemplifies a broader concern over the neoliberal

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<sup>140</sup> The anarchist-inspired *Love Activists* led a prominent campaign against homelessness, field notes (27/07/15).

<sup>141</sup> Field notes (23/03/15). See p. 164.

<sup>142</sup> Member of a socialist party, interview.

<sup>143</sup> Member of *Momentum Merseyside*, interview.

<sup>144</sup> Member of *LATC*, interview.

<sup>145</sup> Member of a socialist party, interview.

<sup>146</sup> Member of *LATC*, interview.

<sup>147</sup> Invest to Earn strategies were regularly caricatured. In one meeting, when a new activist conceded to the logics of urban entrepreneurialism, retorts included that the Mayor had betrayed his class, that he was self-serving, and that he was ‘in the pockets’ of Conservative politicians, field notes (21/01/15).

<sup>148</sup> Interviews (various).

trajectory of the city, which was considered to promote regressive 'trickle down' economics which intensify socio-spatial inequalities and social injustice, rather than the pursuit of socially inclusive or environmentally friendly forms of growth. As another activist claimed, capitalist disinvestment has been a familiar story to Liverpool<sup>149</sup> (Chapter 2), and so neither footloose capital, nor service-sector, visitor-led regeneration (North, 2010), was seen as sufficient to resolve the city's structural economic deficiencies or resulting social inequalities adequately.

In (2), three frames of grievance expressed activists' disillusionment with the council. First, that councillors are careerists, disconnected from the real world and unaccountable to the general public. Secondly, that the council behaves in paternalistic and techno-managerialist ways, and is uninterested in creating genuine dialogue with activists. Thirdly, that this is broadly due to the rightwards shift of Liverpool Labour. The following quotes summarise:

[Councillors] ask 'what can we do?!' when, at the same time, there's a lot of nice wearing suits and drinking champagne. It feels like there's a certain amount of status that these councillors get, and maybe that's one of the main motivations for them being councillors; not actually representing our people and especially vulnerable people in Liverpool.<sup>150</sup>

People hear that there's a council seat going up; they tell one of their mates, before you know it they're into [the council]. They haven't got a political thought in their head, they're incapable of challenging things.<sup>151</sup>

They think we're a hindrance. They're in a bubble, [mimicking] 'what more can we do, we're doing our best'. Joe Anderson is not approachable, that's a big fault for him; he thinks he has the answers.<sup>152</sup>

I think the [local] Labour Party has changed. A lot of radical people, a lot of people who'd stand up and challenge things, were expelled from the party. So if you expel anyone that's radical, then the people that you're left with aren't necessarily going to challenge anything.<sup>153</sup>

The first frame resonates with Clarke's (2012, 2015) work on anti-politics, which captures a growing societal disillusionment with the behaviour of politicians and a consequent popular withdrawal from formal politics (see also Mair, 2013). However, activists also connected contemporary austere realism with a broader rightwards shift within both local (Kantor *et al.*, 1997) and national Labour (Lavalette and Mooney, 2000), which was then counterposed with the actions of the 1983-87 Labour council to explain how austerity should be contested, but was not, due to the political leanings of those in the Town Hall. This implies a measure of

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<sup>149</sup> Member of a socialist party, interview.

<sup>150</sup> Member of *Save our Sanity*, interview.

<sup>151</sup> Member of *Unite CASA 567*, interview.

<sup>152</sup> Member of *Sefton Park Save the Libraries*, interview.

<sup>153</sup> Member of *Momentum Merseyside*, interview.

agency on behalf of LCC which is addressed in 6.5; yet, as in the second quotation, this also identifies the perceived local dominance of an effective New Labour political machine which reflects, for some activists, a throwback to the politics of patronage and bossism of those earlier right-wing Labour administrations, as well as the expulsion of Militant councillors in the late 1980s (Chapter 2). These discursive frames thus illustrate how urban movements effectively reframe the politics of austerity in place-specific ways, where activists are able to situate these processes within the broader histories and geographies of the city. The results also contest territorialist perspectives (Williams, 1989; Harvey, 1996) which imply that 'localised' movements must move from 'militant particularisms' to making more universalising claims (for a fuller discussion, see Chapter 7), which the post-political then argues is hindered due to the depoliticising strategies of local elites (Haughton *et al.*, 2016). Instead, this section has highlighted how the grounds of opposition already stretch beyond cuts at a variety of geographical scales, and evidently display a degree of agency in repudiating local growth strategies, re-politicising austerity politics within the city, and reworking the terms of the debate.

#### 6.4.3 *Imagining Alternatives*

Drawing on Chapter 2, it is held that political imaginaries, constructed through the histories and geographies of past struggle, matter for shaping possibilities and limits for contemporary political activity (Featherstone, 2003, 2005, 2008). The aforementioned discourses of anti-austerity, coupled with this prevailing political imaginary, therefore contributed to discourses of proposed alternatives for LCC. Chapter 5 showed that the binary between overt confrontation and complicit acquiescence was reinforced by LCC, but it was also reiterated by activists themselves, as local public political discourse became constrained by these two strategies, and no other alternatives were considered possible. These competing positions both therefore claimed to propose credible – yet radically different – political alternatives to austerity. This section discusses how activists proposed alternatives, in the forms of both a different kind of campaign, and the political futures envisaged, and what they looked like.

For some activists on the periphery of the assemblage – such as those joining a demonstration in support of libraries or Sure Starts – the degree of alternatives may have been confined to the restoration of a particular service,<sup>154</sup> yet the coalition effectively functioned through the joint articulation of a collective critique by some key actors and organisations (namely the formal political parties and neighbourhood anti-cuts groups) which held that LCC should do more to lobby central government effectively, in alignment with other Labour councils. This

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<sup>154</sup> Library consultations, field notes (26/10/14); Sure Start demonstrations, field notes (29/02/15).

perspective accused the council of being simply “not interested”<sup>155</sup> in bettering the city’s deal with national government (linked to the earlier point about councillor careerism) and argued that, on the topic of non-compliance, the threat of receiving government commissioners to manage the city was not credible, since the council had already conceded that the city would soon be reduced to operating only limited statutory services.<sup>156</sup> To this end, LCC was accused of seeing services into ‘managed decline’, whereby the service would be slowly pared down to the point that it was no longer used, and would thus justify complete closure.<sup>157</sup> The council was also argued to lack transparency in decision-making processes, and to claim political credit for ‘saving’ services which had instead been transferred to the private or third sectors.<sup>158</sup> This outlook positioned LCC as being complicit in enacting austerity urbanism because alternative strategies – such as being more combative and imaginative in mitigating against the cuts – were deemed possible from below. This would include using the council’s reserves and borrowing power<sup>159</sup> to alleviate the cuts temporarily rather than ‘front-loading’, which was seen to depict the council’s embrace of austerity logics.<sup>160</sup> It was therefore considered that the council was resolutely committed to implementing the cuts:

[Liverpool against the Cuts] has always been clear and consistent in the view that Labour councils locally have fiercely implemented and led these attacks on communities and individuals when there were alternatives.<sup>161</sup>

Campaigners called for councillors to vote against the cuts, and for the reinstatement of all previous services,<sup>162</sup> to be accompanied by a mass anti-austerity campaign which would mobilise the council as a “tribune to denounce government policies”.<sup>163</sup> This dominant proposal is outlined in an exchange with former Militant leader Tony Mulhearn:

*TM:* Take what we did in Liverpool in the '80s. What Anderson and the Labour councillors argue now is that ‘there’s nothing we can do, we’re not prepared to go illegal’. [But] if people, pioneers of this movement, hadn’t broken bad class laws in the past, these people wouldn’t have a party to lead [...]

First of all you’ve got to make a stand. [In the 1980s] we said ‘no rate increases to compensate for Tory cuts’ [...] but to defend that we needed to mobilise a mass

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<sup>155</sup> Member of *Unite CASA 567*, interview.

<sup>156</sup> Member of *Momentum Merseyside*, interview.

<sup>157</sup> Member of *Save our Sanity*, interview.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> *TUSC* leaflet (n.d.).

<sup>160</sup> Socialist Party leaflet (n.d.). In 2014, LCC set a three-year budget which ran over the course of the 2015 General Election (*Liverpool Echo*, 2014a). Opponents argued that a one-year emergency budget would have sufficed, buying time for a Labour victory at the polls.

<sup>161</sup> *LATC* monthly meeting agenda (April, 2015).

<sup>162</sup> *Save our Sanity* letter to Cllr Roz Gladden and Mayor Joe Anderson (n.d.); *LATC* monthly meeting, field notes (28/10/15).

<sup>163</sup> Member of a socialist party, interview.



campaign to put pressure on the government, so that they could see the support we had in Liverpool.

*Interviewer:* So what would your tactics in the council chamber be? Say you get elected, what happens next?

*TM:* We would have been elected on a programme of opposition to cuts, with the intention of a mass programme of council house building [...] then you identify how much you will need; say you need £100 million back off central government, you then conduct a campaign. You call a meeting of all interested parties; community organisations, the anti-austerity groups, the local authority trade unions, the national trade union leaders – call mass conferences to develop a policy – first of all to get some active support for that policy, but then also develop a mass campaign by the councils up and down the country.<sup>164</sup>

This view was broadly held across the coalition, with even newer (and non-Militant) activists arguing that “our council could do a lot more, and I think if councils all over the UK made a stand we probably wouldn’t be in the dire position that we’re in today”.<sup>165</sup> Linking back to Chapter 5, this evidences the significant tensions that existed between campaigners and the council, who framed the perceived agency of the local authority in radically different ways. The only exceptions to this overall consensus across the assemblage were the Green Party (Chapter 5), and *Unite CASA 567*, which partially resolved to fight austerity through human rights legislation, for example, contesting the legality of cuts made to adult social care.<sup>166</sup>

In terms of the alternative political futures being envisaged, campaigners made a series of demands of the council and also led local election campaigns (see 6.5.3). The alternatives proposed represented an overarching claim to a fundamentally different kind of society, seen primarily through a socialist lens,<sup>167</sup> and shifted contestation beyond mere opposition to cuts. In February 2015, some neighbourhood groups organised the ‘No Austerity’ conference with the main aim to debate an anti-austerity agenda from below, which could serve as a manifesto for those grassroots groups or individuals who wished to stand in that year’s local elections on an anti-austerity platform (see *Figure 6.1*).

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<sup>164</sup> Tony Mulhearn, former Militant, Socialist Party, *LATC*, interview.

<sup>165</sup> Member of *LATC*, interview.

<sup>166</sup> Member of *Unite CASA 567*, interview; “Human Rights are Community Rights” *Unite CASA 567*, leaflet (n.d.).

<sup>167</sup> Field notes (various).

- Free, high quality public and council services – owned by the people, for the people. Re nationalisation!
- Keep our libraries council-run, properly maintained and fully staffed with trained librarians.
- Against increases in council tax
- Free public transport for children and students
- Fully comprehensive, integrated, publicly accountable and publicly provided, free at the point of delivery NHS, based on need.
- Fully publicly funded education & means to education (Sure Start, libraries)
- Real contracts for workers, proper permanent jobs! Minimum wage £10 an hour.
- Restore - pensioners' and disabled people's rights
- Restore a real benefits safety net; stop all sanctions!
- Scrap Trident and nuclear weapons – use the £100bn for sustainable energy
- Equality for all people; irrespective of race, culture, sexuality, gender, age and disability.
- A society that nurtures, protects and cherishes all its children! Full rights for the child.
- Full rights for women.
- Full rights for all immigrants.
- We are a society – an injury to one is an injury to all. Replant the seed of social solidarity among the young.
- What we win, we win by mobilising – support building local anti-austerity groups in all neighbourhoods.
- Work towards diversifying the movement.
- Support all international struggles against austerity!

**Figure 6.1:** Anti-Austerity Manifesto, Excerpt from No Austerity Pamphlet (Source: No Austerity, 2015).

This provides the best example of activist coherence, but limits remained; first, the high representation of the formal political parties, predominantly Trotskyists, or individuals having associations, sympathies or roots with them, contributed to the building of a particularly state-centric set of demands. Secondly, ideas located outside of this dominant movement discourse – such as working with the council, or embracing the logic of the Big Society (see 6.6.2) – were not considered or, worse, actively shut down. For example, activists from one neighbourhood organisation argued:

[Debate is] frowned upon! Thinking back to the 'No Austerity' [conference] where someone made a proposal about a difference in the way that NHS hospitals would be

managed, and I thought it was a really good idea. I applauded it. I got told not to applaud that kind of thing, because it's not what we're about.<sup>168</sup>

I would like to see more genuine debate about what we want, and unfortunately I think that there are various [Trotskyist] organisations that decide what they want to be done in private and are not really interested in other points of view. If I said what I thought about economic organisation, it would just simply be ignored. It wouldn't even be criticised. It just wouldn't even be answered!<sup>169</sup>

This is partially a result of these parties already having a pre-defined manifesto or series of demands – to which they sought to convert other activists – but this dynamic must also be located within the particular spatio-temporal context through which these discourses were cultivated, where in Liverpool the relatively recent legacies of Militant helped to formulate a palatable, agreed course of action amongst relatively disparate actors, although clearly conflict was present. This ensured that those alternatives which were proposed were framed within the language, strategies and tactics of Trotskyism (addressed in 6.5), whereby capturing the council (or else making demands of it), followed by forcing concessions from the state or otherwise initiating confrontation with the state (Chapter 2) were frequently considered to be a credible course of action. The Militant legacy has ensured that, in Liverpool, local elites do not find alternatives to urban entrepreneurialism credible (North, 2010); the research found that, vice versa, the same factors serve to constrain the lens of acceptable alternatives from the bottom up. There was little sense of developing the 'power to', whereby any cession to the logic or argumentation of the council, such as the implausibility of setting an illegal budget, or of the radical potential for community service transfers, was considered to represent a class compromise<sup>170</sup> in ways reminiscent of the "them" versus "us" outlook characterised by Militant (Kilfoyle, 2000).

This shows how the possibilities and limits for political alternatives are shaped by and through local and national contexts; where Liverpool has a long history of dependency upon central government for wealth redistribution (Chapter 2), within a highly centralised nation-state, this prefigures how austerity urbanism might 'touch down' and be reworked upon meeting resistance. The Liverpoolian picture thus differs markedly from the Argentinean (Dinerstein, 2003; North and Huber, 2004) or Greek (Arampatzi, 2017a; Douzinas, 2013) contexts, where fiscal disciplining and economic crisis has been opposed through more autonomous practices and solidarity initiatives have flourished. Yet, although these alternatives did not necessarily gain traction during the period of research, and perhaps did not represent anything

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<sup>168</sup> [Anonymised], interview.

<sup>169</sup> [Anonymised], interview.

<sup>170</sup> Proposals to take seriously such possibilities were regularly met with suspicion and hostility by the organised left, field notes (various).

resoundingly *new*, it is nonetheless critical to examine more closely what *is* emerging, even if it is not what might be foreseen (Scott, 1985, 1990). The next section therefore situates these alternatives within the complex internal dynamics of the movement, in order to uncover why they took that peculiar form, and to consider how they remained productive in reshaping the political landscape.

## **6.5 Strategies and Tactics of Actually Existing Contestation**

Political ethnographers have argued that social movement strategies cannot be understood simply from their stated goals or agendas but, rather, that acts of political contestation are firmly embedded within movement culture (Auyero, 2007; Blee and Currier, 2006; Jasper, 2004), in addition to responding to particular political opportunities or available resources (McAdam, 1982). In turn, some movements may determine their strategic choices according to the logic of past actions, leading to self-reinforcing sequences of path-dependency where, over time, unfamiliar options become increasingly distant and unreachable, and movements come to reproduce existing action repertoires (Pierson, 2000; Tilly, 1988). While this view is somewhat deterministic, research does illustrate that social movements develop currencies of shared meaning that make certain actions significant only within a particular setting; the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, for example, used open displays of grief within occupied public space as a strategic expression in response to a specific political configuration (Brown and Pickerill, 2009; Dinerstein, 2014). Paraphrasing Marx, Pred (1985: 8) therefore notes how social movements produce history and places not in conditions of their own choosing, but within the context of “already existing, directly encountered social and spatial structures”.

Departing from this work, this section explores more closely how local anti-austerity formations generated political agency and, in turn, considers the barriers to movement-building. This opens up more fruitful avenues for rethinking actually existing anti-austerity politics, and later (6.6) analysing the extent to which such formations were productive in remaking the political landscape. Section 6.5.1 further outlines the complexion of the movement, which shaped its strategic choices, which are then outlined in 6.5.2 and 6.5.3.

### *6.5.1 Movement Divides: 'Old' versus 'New'*

Theorists have long distinguished between ‘old’ social movements – those concerned with redistributing wealth and economic equality, based in the left parties and labour unions – and the ‘new’ post-1968 movements more focused upon post-materialist concerns and struggles for identity rights (Melucci, 1989; Touraine, 1981), although it has equally been argued that this ‘canonical’ dichotomy, broadly conceived, does not accurately represent the chronological trajectory of social movements. In the UK, for example, movements have historically

addressed a plurality of issues that have enabled new alliance possibilities (Cox and Fominaya, 2013), where socialist feminists have seen the two positions as mutually dependent rather than antagonistic (Massey and Wainwright, 1985; cited in Featherstone, 2016). Following the onset of austerity, a number of commentators sought to re-centralise class within social movement studies (Barker, 2013; della Porta, 2014), where a 'new class' of the young and economically disadvantaged – 'the precariat' – was singled out as a main actor (della Porta, 2015; Standing, 2011). Other research has suggested that where anti-austerity has coalesced around a range of heterogeneous issues, there remain significant differences in the socio-demographic characteristics and *style* of protests, yet participants 'old' or 'new', nevertheless do maintain similar political values (Peterson *et al.*, 2015).

The research found that the coalition was constituted of those with roots in the socialist parties and trade unions, anarchists, the politically undecided and non-aligned individuals, while the neighbourhood groups often housed a range of different perspectives. However, the majority self-identified as socialist or Marxist. While 6.6.3 addresses the practicalities of holding this coalition together, the significance here is that the dominant strategic courses of action enacted by the assemblage as a whole broadly bent to the preferences of the 'old' left perspective, owing largely to the performativity of meetings and other action repertoires, which it is held shut down the possibility for other perspectives to be heard. This is not to suggest that other perspectives, such as those of anarchists, were not at all practiced – indeed, they perhaps contributed to some of the more effective repertoires<sup>171</sup> – but they acted on the periphery of the assemblage of actors described in 6.3, and independent of its informal decision-making processes which were informally coordinated through Liverpool against the Cuts (LATC). This took place akin to the 'tyranny of structurelessness' (Freeman, 1972) where particularly skilled political operators – namely Trotskyists well-versed in the politics of vertical organising – assumed, or were granted, an informal voice of leadership in ways which marginalised alternative actors or perspectives. Although LATC<sup>172</sup> notionally operated horizontally, the organising power of the socialist parties awarded them an effective veto in decision-making processes, to the detriment of democratic procedures. The presence of such actors, and dominance of this perspective, reflects the inherent workerism of the city's political culture (Chapter 2), where the 'old' forms of left politics adopted the agency to shape and confine the discourse and the potential range of strategic options considered.

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<sup>171</sup> These included the *Love Activist* occupations of empty buildings and public space in 2015, field notes (various), (*Liverpool Echo*, 2015f); an autonomous demonstration organised by 'new' actors on Facebook, which mobilised several hundred people in a march through the city centre, field notes (28/05/15), (*Liverpool Echo*, 2015g); and several protests led by Liverpool IWW.

<sup>172</sup> In addition, some anonymised neighbourhood groups also functioned in this way, field notes (various).

This occurred through an inability to challenge this perspective effectively, and the reluctance of such actors to engage more reflexively with the strategies and tactics of the coalition. Few meetings considered strategy – instead privileging tactics and procedural motion-passing – and became what some activists labelled “a talking shop”.<sup>173</sup> Critically, although a sizeable minority of movement participants discussed this privately, many felt unable to forward this point in meetings, or else were denied the opportunity to promote alternative approaches. Some examples:

It's a group of squabbling Trotskyists. People might have *slight* tactical disagreements but I think that the disagreements are more personal than ideological.<sup>174</sup>

The Achilles' heel of the anti-cuts movement is that it's mainly people who are used to a different political reality and economic reality, and who want to go back to that reality, instead of moving with the times. Is it not telling that the anti-cuts movement has very few young people?! And those young people who occasionally come are basically driven away by the way that people behave, by people who think that the world has stopped in 1985!<sup>175</sup>

The anti-cuts platform consists of the 'usual suspects', people on the fringe of the political discourse. I don't know whether they're trying to make a difference at a local level, or if they're trying to promote their own petty political interests at a local level, with these delusions of grandeur. [They] are stuck in the past and they cannot work a way around the current situation, they cannot bring themselves to talk to the current situation, the political, economic and even cultural circumstances. On the other hand you get people who would like to make a difference who are politically aware, who have moved on with the times but cannot find a way of breaking the mould, so to speak, so it's a very frustrating situation.<sup>176</sup>

Brown and Pickerill (2009) propose that, within activism, age can prove a key determinant of exclusion, but contra their recognition of the impatience of youthful activists, and the lack of transmission of intergenerational knowledge from old to young, here the reverse process acted to foreclose the possibilities for alternative action repertoires to flourish; it was the 'old' left, “regurgitating a politics from the 1980s today”<sup>177</sup> that was considered to be behaving “very very conservative[ly]”<sup>178</sup> in terms of strategy.

There was also a distinct sidelining of 'identity' issues such as gender and race, reflecting the historic workerism and class reductionism of Trotskyist politics in the city; as one member of a socialist party remarked: “they wanted to spend thirty minutes talking about female

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<sup>173</sup> [Anonymised], interview.

<sup>174</sup> [Anonymised], interview.

<sup>175</sup> [Anonymised], interview.

<sup>176</sup> [Anonymised], interview.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>178</sup> [Anonymised], interview.

oppression – I mean, come on!’<sup>179</sup> This also speaks to a lingering machismo which further excluded women and ethnic minorities.<sup>180</sup> Although one neighbourhood group recognised some of these tensions, and sought to diversify the movement by communicating with some of the city’s largest ethnic minority groups (Polish, Arab and Somalian),<sup>181</sup> and others focused on connecting with students and ‘the youth’,<sup>182</sup> this often rested upon ‘explaining’ a prescriptive formula rather than seeking to promote genuine inclusion and form productive solidarities or political alternatives. This does reflect some of the historic critiques of the ‘old’ left discussed in Chapter 2, including paternalism and the lack of democratisation, where the focus is on ‘winning support’, mobilisation, but not participation (Gyford, 1985). This all led one activist to conclude that “there are a lot of competing male, aged egos on the left”<sup>183</sup> and others, in clear allude to the politics of Militant, proposed that:

It’s just not good enough to talk about workers’ rights, you’ve got to start expanding that to disability rights, environmental rights, the right not to be spied upon, the right to a decent home, the right to a living wage; the whole question of rights has got to be expanded. With that, I believe you could create and mobilise whole groups of people who have never been involved in politics before. Young people are very clued up – not about *nationalising the top 200 monopolies* – but they’re very savvy about equality, about the question of debt, and there is potential for major mobilisation there.<sup>184</sup>

We need to be constructing spaces that are outside of the logic of capitalism, although that doesn’t really combine well with the people who tend to view socialism as meaning ‘we all work in the NHS’.<sup>185</sup>

However, other non-aligned individuals pointed to the presence of such ‘class fighters’ – particularly former Militants and other respected political individuals – as a source of deep respect and personal inspiration who gave the movement more credibility, not less:

I think it’s wonderful when you see all the people who’ve fought the good fight thirty, forty, fifty years ago and they’re still enthused, and they’re actually teaching the young; ‘this is how we fought it then’, and it’s wonderful to have those skills brought to the table. These people are time served, and I admire and look up to those people.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> [Anonymised], interview; field notes (03/02/15).

<sup>180</sup> Private discussions, field notes (various).

<sup>181</sup> Field notes (05/02/15); also *OSAC* leaflet (in Polish), (April, 2015). A lack of engagement with Liverpool’s black population is discussed in Chapter 7.

<sup>182</sup> The Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) hold regular stalls at the city’s universities, as well as running student societies. *OSAC* has also sought to build links with students.

<sup>183</sup> [Anonymised], interview.

<sup>184</sup> Member of *Unite CASA 567*, interview; emphasis added.

<sup>185</sup> Member of *LATC*, interview.

<sup>186</sup> Member of *Keep our NHS Public Merseyside*, interview.

Where the post-crash anti-austerity movements such as *Occupy* and the *Indignados* arose out of a critique of the 'old way of doing things' (Aslanidis, 2016; Douzinas, 2013; Halvorsen, 2012), this has not been borne out in Liverpool, or the UK more generally (Schiavone, 2016; Worth, 2013), where 'old' left actors remained dominant in shaping the most explicit forms of contestatory discourse. This illustrates the concerns of Richard Seymour, who has warned that, in the case of Momentum, the path towards organising new futures depends upon the coming together of the young, politically indeterminate with the "older Bennite and Militant-style leftovers [who] are, in general, too ideologically formed and politically inflexible" to help rebuild a new left (Seymour, 2016: 95). Whilst this may sound hyperbolic, it does at least reflect some of these ongoing practices and tensions within Liverpool, and reminds us of the claims of one local Labour councillor; that people who "get caught up in the 'hard-left'; they're chewed up and they're spat out. They're just fodder."<sup>187</sup> It is here, therefore, where the 'we' splits. The following sections observe how these features helped to shape the strategic direction of the movement in two ways; *targets* and *tactics*.

#### 6.5.2 *Terrains of Struggle*

As aforementioned, it would be expected that contestation would foremost be directed towards the Conservative Government, in keeping with the decades of 'anti Tory' sentiment characteristic of the city (Chapter 2). However, contemporary forms of resistance were overwhelmingly levelled towards the local Labour City Council, reflecting more the post-1980s trajectory of socialist politics within the city, where socialists had generally moved away (or had been expelled) from the Labour Party, and had become disillusioned with New Labour (Taylor, 2011). Since these individuals had thereafter moved into revolutionary parties positioned in opposition to Labour, their targeting of local Labour can be seen through the lens of party politics, in addition to keeping with the Trotskyist strategy of mobilising the crisis for revolutionary ends. Although entryism is no longer viable, pressuring the council to confront central government certainly echoes this past; if the council refuses, it is hypothesised that their class betrayal will be revealed for all the citizenry to see, and that people will resultantly switch their support to the socialist parties.<sup>188</sup>

By means discussed above (6.5.1), the strategy of critiquing the council carried discursive and organisational purchase through LATC, despite the misgivings of some activists.<sup>189</sup> This also reflects the former Militant outlook of being more grounded in ideology and symbolism than pragmatism (Kantor *et al.*, 1997), yet this style of struggle gained little purchase over the

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<sup>187</sup> Cllr Jane Corbett, interview (Chapter 5).

<sup>188</sup> Member of a socialist party, interview.

<sup>189</sup> Private discussions, field notes (various).



research period.<sup>190</sup> This is evidenced by the overall difficulty in mobilising forces, where public demonstrations at the Town Hall regularly attracted fewer than thirty people,<sup>191</sup> compared to, for example, the hundreds of parents, children and Sure Start workers who joined hands around the iconic Cunard Building in support of the council-approved demonstration against central government cuts.<sup>192</sup> Anti-cuts activists were conflicted, and many refused to participate.<sup>193</sup> Councillors argued that local people accepted the standpoint of the Labour council, and that they blamed central government for the cuts.<sup>194</sup> Figure 6.2 shows the rhetoric of Sure Start demonstrators, whose slogans 'No Central Governments Cuts' and 'Liverpool leads the way saving children's centres' contrasted markedly to the anti-austerity protest of 27<sup>th</sup> May 2015, in which the main bloc led with "Joe [Anderson] Must Go".<sup>195</sup>



**Figure 6.2:** Sure Start Demonstration at the Cunard Building, 28 February 2015 (Source: Author).

For activists, the role of the Labour council closed down potential political opportunities:

I think a massive issue for us is that we've got a Labour Council, and it's a very strong, safe Labour area; people have been brought up where their families have voted for

<sup>190</sup> Some groups, such as OSAC, argued that a "victorious campaign" against the council was responsible for preventing library closures (*Socialist Voice*, 2015a: 3). Councillors (various interviews) and also other activists disputed the campaign's significance. The significance of the *Socialist Voice* is explained in footnote 236: p. 168.

<sup>191</sup> Field notes (various).

<sup>192</sup> Field notes (28/02/15); *Liverpool Echo* (2015h).

<sup>193</sup> Field notes (03/03/15).

<sup>194</sup> Interviews with councillors (various); field notes (30/02/15).

<sup>195</sup> Field notes (28/05/15).

Labour, they vote for Labour, they see Labour as being the voice of the working-class in Liverpool.<sup>196</sup>

The establishment of a strong local political consensus (Chapter 5), led by Liverpool Labour and supported by the major trade unions, was ultimately disempowering and debilitating, while the reluctance to sympathise with Labour, or to collaborate with the local state, prevented new alliances from forming. Where nearby Labour-run cities such as Manchester and Birmingham have seen relatively popular engagement with the People's Assembly Against Austerity,<sup>197</sup> this movement gained little traction in Liverpool due to its reluctance to criticise Labour councils.<sup>198</sup> The organisation quickly dissipated, and one of the organisers shortly after became a Labour councillor. One campaigner disputed this: "we weren't anti-Labour, we were anti-Liverpool Labour; we were anti-Joe Anderson and his interpretation of what you should do, which was cuts, cuts, cuts",<sup>199</sup> although austere realism has of course been a defining feature of all Labour councils in the UK. This highly antagonistic relationship with the council was mutual, as outlined in Chapter 5, where councillors reportedly told activists that "you're wasting your time [protesting], you need to go down and start knocking on doors of Tories",<sup>200</sup> while another activist explained:

I've been in council meetings and Tony Mulhearn has spoken, it's embarrassing to watch [Anderson's] response. I consider Tony to be far superior to him politically and intellectually, and he quite clearly sees [Mulhearn] as a threat because his responses to him are really derogatory and rude. Joe Anderson is right-wing as far as I'm concerned.<sup>201</sup>

Another discussed:

*Interviewer:* Can we work with the council?

*Respondent:* No, I don't think we can. [Anderson] has said too many things about us and we've said too many things about him, we just couldn't do it. If Anderson went I

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<sup>196</sup> Member of LATC, interview.

<sup>197</sup> The People's Assembly Against Austerity is a national organisation that formed in 2013 calling for a broad-based movement to forge common campaigns against austerity. It included a range of politicians and activists, and "members of Counterfire, the Communist Party of Britain, the left-wing of the Labour Party, Greens and trade unionists from the Trade Union Congress, Unite, the Public and Commercial Services Union, the National Union of Teachers, and the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers" (see Maignashca *et al.*, 2016: 41); People's Assembly Against Austerity 'No More Austerity' National Demonstration in London, field notes (23/06/14).

<sup>198</sup> While in 2013 the first two meetings in Liverpool saw participation within the hundreds, the People's Assembly soon fell away. Some activists attempted to revive the local organisation in 2015, but to little avail.

<sup>199</sup> Member of LATC, interview.

<sup>200</sup> Member of LATC, interview.

<sup>201</sup> Member of LATC, interview.

think it could be a different matter because it's *very personal* now, the politics in Liverpool...<sup>202</sup>

While the mayor was perhaps dealing with confrontation in ways typical of the gritty, robust nature of Liverpoolian politics, this contributed to the failure to initiate meaningful dialogue, and served to marginalise activists from political debate. In contrast, working in Liverpool on issues of decarbonisation, North *et al.* (2017) suggest that forming alliances with sympathetic local policy-makers can produce productive outcomes; yet campaigners were unable to depend upon the meaningful support of councillors or their officers, trade unions, or the third sector, or to generate effective alliances. The importance here is not to propose that anti-austerity imaginaries should 'scale up' their protests or seek to transcend the 'local' to the 'universal', but to suggest that within these specific political configurations, contesting austerity primarily at the municipal scale proved disempowering and debilitating over time, and prevented new solidarities from emerging, locally and nationally. This is also not to downplay the broader internationalist outlook of the coalition, as clearly many socialists harboured more globalist ambitions, and many groups at least rhetorically attempted to generate solidarities across borders, although some attempts developed better than others.<sup>203</sup> Rather, this action operated at a level of *strategy* rather than outlook.

### 6.5.3 Tactics

Tactics, or "action repertoires" (Tilly, 1986: 390) are the specific tools and actions available to, and deployed by, movements in order to achieve their strategic objectives (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014). In Liverpool, a number of action repertoires was developed, ranging from: public demonstrations against LCC and other state institutions and private companies,<sup>204</sup> marches through the city centre and the occupation of public space,<sup>205</sup> direct action,<sup>206</sup> publicly challenging elites through the media, attending council meetings and via written

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<sup>202</sup> Member of *LATC*, interview.

<sup>203</sup> Some examples include *LATC*'s proposal to 'twin' with a grassroots organisation in Greece, and holding a number of demonstrations and public meetings in support of SYRIZA; "solidarity from Garston to Greece", *Left Unity* Liverpool, leaflet (n.d.), in addition to the 2015 'No Austerity' conference drawing support from trade unions in Italy, Belgium, France and Brazil (owing to links forged by the *International Socialist League*).

<sup>204</sup> Regular demonstrations took place outside the Town Hall, while others targeted the Department for Work and Pensions (responsible for welfare sanctions) and private companies which exploited workfare and/or zero-hours contracts, field notes (various).

<sup>205</sup> The largest protest, organised on Facebook and led by 'new' activists labelled *Protest Merseyside*, involved several hundred participants, field notes (28/05/15). The *Love Activists* occupied a number of empty buildings and public sites within the city during 2015, field notes (30/07/15).

<sup>206</sup> *Sefton Park Save the Libraries* led an innovative campaign of mass book-borrowing to raise awareness of library closures. Their target was, tellingly, the crime section (see *Figure 6.5*), field notes (19/07/15); *Liverpool Echo* (2015i).

correspondence with councillors,<sup>207</sup> collecting petitions,<sup>208</sup> and producing independent reports,<sup>209</sup> – see *Figures 6.3, 6.4, 6.5 and 6.6.*



**Figure 6.3:** Demonstration at Liverpool Town Hall, n.d. (Source: Author).



**Figure 6.4:** Workshop at the No Austerity Conference, 14 February 2015 (Source: Author).

<sup>207</sup> A regular proposed tactic of *LATC* and of the neighbourhood groups was to contest policy decisions and demand answers in writing, field notes (various).

<sup>208</sup> In total, 20,000 signatures were collected for a petition against library closures, field notes (various).

<sup>209</sup> *Keep our NHS Public Merseyside* (2015) Princes Park Health Centre: The Destruction of Community-based GP Services.





**Figure 6.5:** Direct Action at Sefton Park Library: 'Clearing the Crime Section', 19 July 2015 (Source: Anon., 2015).



**Figure 6.6:** Love Activist's Occupation of the former Bank of England Building, 22 April 2015 (Source: Independent Liverpool, 2015).

However, the 'old' and 'new' left divide extended to questions of strategy; according to one activist, LATC first operated via anarchist principles, but occupations began to cease when:

We'd have protests outside the Town Hall and [anarchists] would be taking decisions to occupy it, but had never consciously made it at Liverpool against the Cuts meetings. I think [the occupations] became less important – we haven't done a proper one in some time – it's more now about going into meetings. The occupations were ineffective, they just pissed people off; they pissed the police off, they pissed the

council off, and people who went in were never representative of Liverpool against the Cuts, they weren't people who particularly came to our meetings.<sup>210</sup>

This represents the fissures existing between the different forms of political praxis, where the 'old' left remained hostile to working with those of an anarchist or horizontalist perspective, and instead forwarded more vertical forms of organising, which recognised the necessity for "stable leadership" and a democratically-elected "properly executive body" which had the capacity to reunite the fragmented movement.<sup>211</sup> The period of research coincided with elections at the ward, mayoral and national levels in mid-2015, and this ultimately formed one of the most significant strategies for contesting austerity, and was forwarded by the formal political parties and also some individuals in neighbourhood groups. TUSC (a national formal coalition including the Socialist Party and, at the time, Socialist Workers Party) stood on an anti-austerity platform,<sup>212</sup> as did a neighbourhood group-cum political party *Old Swan against the Cuts*, which, in 2016, registered second place and 12 per cent of the vote in the predominantly working-class ward of Old Swan.<sup>213</sup> (see *Figure 6.7*). However, some activists were critical of the efficacy of this tactic:

The reality is that you know voting for TUSC is a waste of a vote; they got less than UKIP. I live in Liverpool 8! I live in the heart of Toxteth; that is worrying!<sup>214</sup>

I think this is a distraction, the [conference] takes only six hours and part of it will be wasted on legal electoral issues, instead of biting deeper into 'movement-building' issues (i.e. the stuff from the workshops), which the politicians will quickly deal with and then immediately forget about.<sup>215</sup>

Anderson used to say 'you stand up on an anti-cuts programme and people don't vote for it, and they voted for us' and that's very damaging, you walk right into it. I've always said that you should never stand on that platform because they just say 'well hang on, you got no votes!', 'UKIP got more votes than you!'<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Member of *LATC*, interview.

<sup>211</sup> Tony Mulhearn, former Militant, Socialist Party, *LATC*, interview.

<sup>212</sup> Former Militant Tony Mulhearn stood as the mayoral candidate for *TUSC* in Liverpool in 2016, losing heavily (see *Figure 5.1*).

<sup>213</sup> Liverpool City Council (2016e).

<sup>214</sup> Member of *LATC*, interview. Toxteth, or Liverpool 8, is the site of the 1981 uprising, and remains an ethnically diverse, inner-city neighbourhood. The fact that the right-wing party UKIP gained more votes here than TUSC is therefore significant.

<sup>215</sup> Private correspondence (13/02/15). The 'No Austerity' conference in February 2015 organised an afternoon of workshops to debate movement-building, and support the agreement of an electoral programme for all anti-cuts groups. The idea of workshops was infantilised and considered to be a distraction by critics supportive of 'old' left strategies, field notes (29/02/15).

<sup>216</sup> Member of *LATC*, interview.

**VOTE MARTIN RALPH**  
**OLD SWAN**  
AGAINST THE CUTS  
**NO AUSTERITY**

# 7 May VOTE Martin Ralph Old Swan Against the Cuts

## NO AUSTERITY NO COUNCIL CUTS

**Our victories**

- Labour wanted to close Old Swan and 10 other libraries. With local residents we took to the streets every week, collected 20,000 signatures, held two demonstrations, and had mass support including 500 writers and artists.
- It was after this that Labour reversed their decision. The libraries didn't close.
- They also reversed their decision to close Sure Start children's centres.

**Our candidate**

Martin has lived in Old Swan for 15 years, he helped found Old Swan Against the Cuts.

He is a member of International Socialist League and has been an active trade unionist all his life.

He works with grassroots campaigns and led the organisation of the "No Austerity" conference in Liverpool.

He would vote against all cuts.

**Figure 6.7:** Excerpt from Old Swan against the Cuts election leaflet, May 2015 (Source: Old Swan against the Cuts).

The election strategies were therefore countered as being a waste of time, resources and energy, and giving opposition forces (i.e. the Labour Party) the opportunity to decry the paltry vote share of the left parties, and thus further providing the mayor with a legitimate platform to oversee the cuts.<sup>217</sup> Indeed, organising for the elections cost a significant amount of activists' resources, and came at the expense of creating decision-making spaces about strategy.<sup>218</sup> Yet, for others, operating within the formal institutions of politics offered a further mechanism to develop the anti-austerity movement – "it gives everybody in the group the possibility of talking to new people, to understand the election process, to organise meetings"<sup>219</sup> and thus electioneering in itself was considered to be a strategy constitutive of movement-building and generating new strategies. Elections as action repertoires have been simultaneously posed as presenting new opportunities for social movements (Imig, 1998) and, in contrast, as simply channelling and co-opting grassroots groups into the formal political system (Meyer, 1993). However, the experiences of Barcelona en Comú – a citizen-led platform which emerged from

<sup>217</sup> Indeed, having an 'electoral mandate' was a regular retort of the mayor, field notes (various).

<sup>218</sup> Field notes (13/05/15).

<sup>219</sup> Martin Ralph, ward councillor candidate representing OSAC, interview.

the *Indignados* movement and its associated solidarity networks, and which won control of the Catalan capital in June 2015 – point towards the radical possibilities for such nascent municipal movements (for an overview of this process, see Russell and Reyes, 2017).

This section has shown how the distinct strategies and action repertoires that developed emerged within a particular context, owing to the dominance of 'old' political frameworks, and acted to fundamentally limit the possibilities for alternative forms of political contestation. Where groups took action outside of this framework, they were unlikely to see their ideas travel across this broader assemblage of social relations. To this end, it is important to remember that movement strategies are constructed moments which are always contested at a variety of scales (Blee and Currier, 2007). This also demonstrates how place is not merely a backdrop, but an important site of struggle, and increasingly so within a context where the politics of austerity are being enacted and reworked at the local level. Yet, can one claim that such configurations were therefore eventually 'unsuccessful'? The final section considers this, and interrogates further the potentialities and limits posed through these forms of actually existing contestation.

## 6.6 Potentialities and Limits

In 6.1, it was proposed that grassroots resistance ultimately struggled to grow in Liverpool, being jostled out by dominant council discourses of austere realism and urban entrepreneurialism, and also due to a number of structural and strategic dysfunctions which hindered the coalition. Nonetheless, returning to the notion of more-than-cuts, engaging with ostensibly unproductive expressions of political activity can uncover a more nuanced reading. This final section considers three key strategic factors; firefighting, the 'Big Society', and maintaining the coalition.

### 6.6.1 Firefighting

One key aspect that movement participants reflexively considered was that of 'firefighting', which was used to describe the ways in which the movement opposed cuts on an individual basis, shifting from one campaign to the next, but lacked a more coherent, overarching strategy that pictured what an alternative future might look like. This was metaphorically outlined by one activist as "firefighting",<sup>220</sup> and another as "putting sticking plasters on gaping wounds",<sup>221</sup> while others acknowledged:

It's not enough to say what we're against but we've got to say what we're for, and to think of alternatives. 'Cos you can stand on the street and say 'we're against cuts,

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<sup>220</sup> Member of LATC, interview.

<sup>221</sup> Member of Unite CASA 567, interview.



we're against this' but the minute people say 'what are you for?' then we're flummoxed.<sup>222</sup>

The stuff that we're doing at the minute, campaigning to save local facilities is good work, and it's worth doing; my kids go to that library. Having said that, it's not going to change anything, even if we manage to keep that going. There needs to be an alternative ideology put out there and explained to people; there needs to be examples of economic structures that work outside of this repressive capitalist system that we've got now.<sup>223</sup>

While the assemblage of individuals and organisations practicing anti-austerity politics may each have shared their own different visions for enacting political futures, this was not borne out at the discursive or organisational level in LATC or through other collective mechanisms where a new form of anti-austerity politics might necessarily have emerged, and discussions remained focused on procedural matters. This suggests that while the politics of anti-austerity must be read through a more-than-cuts perspective which seeks to shift opposition beyond cuts and towards a broader political critique, 'newer' activists particularly felt that the potential for imagining alternatives to austerity remained limited, and that the proposals developed – even at the February 2015 'No Austerity' conference – did not rectify this tension. Despite managing to agree on a broad set of demands, these proposals lacked the strategic impetus to gain ground locally,<sup>224</sup> and were considered to be too characteristic of 'old' left perspectives. Hence, for some activists, as above, this was a major inhibiting factor in developing a broader movement against austerity. For others, firefighting was instead purposefully deployed as an effective means to grow the movement:

To be honest, initially, there were other campaigns that I would have probably identified as more important than the library campaign. But what we found when we were doing other campaigning is that people were very worried and very concerned about the discontinuation of the library service and there were always rumours surfacing that the libraries were going to close. When they did [announce closure] it actually astonished me the level of affection and loyalty that people had to their local libraries, so we started collecting petitions and it was the easiest petition I'd ever in my life collected. It seems that nowadays people like a single campaign, they need something that's local, it's relevant to them, and that they can get involved in.<sup>225</sup>

In another such example, Old Swan against the Cuts discussed how firefighting was not about simply 'reacting' to oppose particular cuts, but instead involved responding to the different needs of the group. In one example, a wheelchair-bound activist joined the group, and had told of the difficulties he suffered in navigating the physical landscape of the old, working-class

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<sup>222</sup> Member of LATC, interview.

<sup>223</sup> [Anonymised], interview.

<sup>224</sup> 'No Austerity' conference, field notes (15/02/15). P. 149 situated these demands within the geographical context, and Section 6.5.2 discussed the strategic limits to these proposals.

<sup>225</sup> Member of *Sefton Park Save the Libraries*, interview.

neighbourhood. The group responded by campaigning against the council, and published a pamphlet detailing the problems posed not only for the physically-impaired but for the elderly and those with prams too.<sup>226</sup> This shows that while firefighting was commonly identified as resulting from a lack of strategic oversight, and contributes to arguments that the post-crisis left is 'reactive' and unproductive in a context of austerity urbanism, by engaging with such actually existing forms of contestation one can understand that through responding to the actual (and diverse) needs of the group that the left is recomposing itself, and through this a more radical politics might emerge. With a focus on participation, rather than merely mobilisations, such practices also challenge those tendencies outlined earlier, although the latter were much more dominant across the assemblage as a whole.

### *6.6.2 Big Society*

The Coalition Government's 'Big Society' agenda proposed that statist forms of provision are detached and unresponsive to community needs and that the state should therefore redistribute power to individuals and local communities through the devolution of services and developing citizens' capabilities to meet their own needs (Norman, 2010), discourses which the previous chapter identified as occurring within a context of austerity urbanism. Academic debate has considered whether this initiative necessarily promotes community empowerment, or is instead simply a cynical cover for the withdrawal of the state (see North, 2011a), and this prompted similar considerations across the assemblage at a number of stages. As Chapter 5 showed, LCC threatened to close libraries unless organisations or individuals volunteered to take over their running, and this posed a strategic dilemma for activists. First, universal consensus was held that devolution was, undoubtedly, a cover for cuts – and that 'austerity as opportunity' was a disingenuous manoeuvre by the council to elide the very real limitations posed by transfers of services to the community – and no singular actor embraced this. Indeed, many doubted the capacities of the city's neighbourhoods to respond to the task adequately (see Deas and Doyle, 2013), particularly those most deprived areas in north Liverpool. While the council valorised the role of Alt Valley Community Trust (AVCT) in running community services in Croxteth, Chief Executive Phil Knibb conceded that:

We don't particularly want to run sports centres or anything else, we're very municipally-minded; we want the local authority to have strategic responsibility for all that. We'd rather go home and have a quiet life!<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> Field notes (23/03/15). The group also responded to a number of other issues, where group members suffered welfare sanctions and the bedroom tax, field notes (12/12/14). See also Chapter 7.

<sup>227</sup> Phil Knibb, Alt Valley Community Trust, interview. Phil Knibb also played a crucial role in the 1982 occupation of Croxteth Comprehensive (see Chapter 7).

This politics of necessity was also accepted by the Green Party, who at first joined *Sefton Park Save the Libraries* to oppose the closure of Sefton Park Library located in St Michael's, one of the few Green wards in the city. An initial meeting welcomed around a hundred concerned residents,<sup>228</sup> but later support split into two camps; one group, *Sefton Park Save the Libraries*, steadfastly rejected any consideration of community ownership, while another, *Friends of Sefton Park Library*, led by the Green Party, had accepted that while being "very much a second best option",<sup>229</sup> it was important to mobilise some level of volunteer effort to keep the library service sustained at any cost. The Greens argued that "we would all prefer a council-owned and council-run public library"<sup>230</sup> but that work on a 'Plan B' must persist, whereas 'Save the Libraries' viewed this as undermining the campaign, and persistently asked them to withdraw.<sup>231</sup> Some in the movement were deeply suspicious of this process, with one suggesting that organisations such as AVCT have no public accountability and, moreover, that they were "too close to the Labour Party".<sup>232</sup> Others argued that devolution was not in itself a regressive move, but that it was the *terms* upon which these opportunities were engendered – in the context of severe funding cuts – which were problematic (see North, 2011a). Discussions therefore exposed wider political imaginaries of the radical potential of service transfers for community empowerment, with libraries, free schools and the NHS each considered:

A free school *in our hands* is a very good thing. That would be a really good opportunity for a community to take control, because the amount of times we spend complaining about the council; 'I hate the council, terrible council, terrible council, doing awful things, but then they've got to be running our schools!'<sup>233</sup>

Responses to co-production elsewhere have been lukewarm, at best, and, in Leicester and Cardiff, were conceptualised as a "last defence against full commercialisation, occupying a nebulous space between neoliberal self-help and contentious politics" (Davies and Blanco, 2017: 12; Gregory, 2015), demonstrating how anti-austerity networks at large reject collaboration with the state and NGOs (Davies, 2017a). Linked to the earlier discussion about the movements' relationship with the council, many anti-austerity groups approached with deep cynicism the possibility of engaging on the council's terms, fearing the possibility of being co-opted or else inadvertently reinforcing the status quo. Yet, Lerner (2014) notes that rather than being read cynically as services being invited into 'managed decline', and there being little potential for social movements which otherwise risk being drawn into depoliticising tendencies, such engagements *can* fundamentally question the *status quo* and

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<sup>228</sup> Field notes (03/09/14).

<sup>229</sup> *Green View Extra*, leaflet, October/November 2014.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> Field notes (various); private correspondence (25/09/14); [anonymised], interview.

<sup>232</sup> LATC monthly meeting, field notes (10/12/14).

<sup>233</sup> Member of OSAC, interview.

constitute radical alternatives. Perhaps, therefore, the movement set the bar too high for what could necessarily be considered as 'radical politics' (North *et al.*, 2017), where any deviation from rhetorically contesting the council was seen as a compromise too far. This very narrow interpretation of what political contestation could look like therefore served to limit the possible avenues of engagement for grassroots groups, and further contributed to their estrangement from mainstream political discourse, as well as preventing new solidarities from emerging.

### 6.6.3 *Maintaining the Coalition*

As outlined earlier, this loose assemblage was held together by some important commonalities, but was riven with conflict, and major strategic differences served to fragment and undermine the trajectory of this coalition, while considerable energies were spent trying to unite and maintain the competing political factions. The (im)practicalities of holding this coalition together proved a constant source of strain for many activists, and the failure to achieve strategic compromises meant that political actions were either weakened – where some groups refused to participate – or sometimes left entirely unfulfilled. Individual groups might practice their own repertoires, but effective collective action was limited; LATC was the organisational body through which this coalition assembled, yet:

When we first set up Liverpool against the Cuts we had a very strong, clear goal: we wanted this to be a true coalition. Liverpool, because of its strengths in its political history and the nature of a lot of the people from Liverpool – that they're quite politicised – means that it can be quite sectarian and that people are quite embedded in where they are politically and their own parties etc., so we were very aware that the coalition needed to be a coalition, and that it couldn't be taken over by one group to the exclusion of another. [However] it seems like more energy goes into that aspect of it than actually campaigning against cuts.<sup>234</sup>

The sectarianism of party politics was a constant source of frustration to those independent of such procedures, where the jostling for power between the various left parties was seen to stunt the growth or development of the coalition, which was constantly being pulled in different directions. This is supported by field observations, but is better told by the activists themselves:

It's been totally frustrating; old animosities rose to the surface very quickly within the anti-cuts movement in Liverpool and you can't do anything without people bringing stuff up from the past. The factions that I grew up with, the sniping, the vitriol, the attacks on people. It made me tired, dispirited, and it made me question a few people now.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Member of LATC, interview.

<sup>235</sup> Member of LATC, interview.

There's some very valiant people who desperately try to bring everyone together under the one umbrella, but within that you have groups of people who are incapable of working together because of their history and politics; would you get someone from the old WRP working with someone from Militant? No! Would you get someone from the SWP working with someone from the WRP? No! All those fractures are still there, and you can see them played out in Liverpool against the Cuts.<sup>236</sup>

At the [meeting] most recently I found that people were actually fighting battles within the confines of the meeting. There were a lot of arguments and insults, and basically people were hogging the limelight.<sup>237</sup>

LATC was formed in 2010, and its history is fraught with personal distrust and ideological differences which have constantly threatened the very existence of the organisation, as well as the left's capacity for movement-building in the city.<sup>238</sup> However, this reached a tipping point in mid-2015, following accusations of fascist sympathising in some neighbourhood groups (some even claimed infiltration), which created uncompromisable fissures between competing tendencies within the coalition. The accused groups dismissed the claims, and also argued for the importance of 'educating' those who had previously aired racist, sexist or other discriminatory views.<sup>239</sup> In combating right-wing populism, anti-austerity politics would have to debate, rather than castigate, so long as the accused is ready to denounce their former views. Other individuals, particularly those simultaneously involved in anti-fascist organising, found this approach wholly unpalatable, and would no longer cooperate with the former organisations on the basis of "no platform for fascists".<sup>240</sup> The affair produced some highly tense meetings, and a number of individuals and groups discontinued their participation within LATC, with the remaining shell proving even less effective than before.

This internal debate was heightened following the real presence of fascists in the city the same year, who sought to mobilise on a 'White Man March' (see Chapter 7 for a fuller discussion). Those on the Liverpool left contributed to a highly successful counter-demonstration,<sup>241</sup> in which one campaigner suggested that the fluidity of the assemblage was precisely a strength; being only informally coordinated, people did not commit to an organisation but rather dipped

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<sup>236</sup> Member of LATC, interview; the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) is a small Trotskyist organisation in the UK. The *International Socialist League* (ISL) split from the WRP in 1988, and remains active in Liverpool. *Socialist Voice*, cited herein, is a monthly newspaper of the ISL and is edited by Martin Ralph, the ward councillor candidate representing OSAC.

<sup>237</sup> Member of LATC, interview.

<sup>238</sup> Member of LATC, interview, field notes (various).

<sup>239</sup> Much of this evidence related to anti-Semitic or racist activity on social media, and also proposed support for the right-wing party UKIP. A fuller discussion of the role and prevalence of anti-Semitism and conspiracy theory on the left can be found in Rich (2016).

<sup>240</sup> [Anonymised organisation], motion, August 2015.

<sup>241</sup> Tellingly, this counter-demonstration included two organisational forms; Unite Against Fascism (made up of the 'old' and institutional left) and the Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network, horizontally organised and constituted by younger, predominantly autonomous activists.

in and out, in ways which reflected the political culture of the city. Liverpoolians were therefore posed as having an intuitive sense of when it is necessary to mobilise. On the anti-fascist counter-demonstration:

There were football supporters who were in town early. I also knew people from the black community who were coming out. Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network did their job, but then there's other people who won't stand with them [e.g.] the football supporters. [Some activists] won't be identified, they're not joiners, and that's the thing in Liverpool; people aren't joiners. I saw old people I haven't seen for years lining up on the street [...] it was a very strange coming together and typical Liverpool, because we had Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network on St Luke's steps, faces covered, we had Unite Against Fascism marching in the opposite direction, you had the footy and members of the black community being openly 'come on' and it was great! But everyone was doing their own thing!<sup>242</sup>

This highlights the nature of this assemblage of social relations that is impossible to contain analytically or logistically, yet the advantage was precisely the ability to mobilise seemingly disparate forces around a particular cause, albeit temporarily, thus evidencing the extent to which forms of actually existing contestation cannot be read as one unified movement behind a coherent strategic goal. However, the irregular participation and spontaneous intervention of movement participants also produced certain tensions,<sup>243</sup> as well as disruption and discontinuity for movement-building processes. LATC also failed to build effective solidarities with all campaigns against cuts; in the case of the Sure Starts, LATC were labelled "militant activists only interested in furthering their own political causes",<sup>244</sup> rather than being seen as comrades engaged in shared struggle. Consequently, Sure Start campaigners would not attend LATC meetings.<sup>245</sup>

Finally, subscribers to 'old' left politics identified a 'crisis of leadership' as the primary inhibiting factor. The lack of a coherent unifying body, such as the District Labour Party (DLP), combined with the fragmentation of the labour movement and the hollowing-out of civil society, was perceived to have resulted in an inability to organise working-class forces. This perspective emphasises the shift of both national and local Labour to the right, and

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<sup>242</sup> [Anonymised], interview; *Socialist Voice* (2015b: 6). The Anti-Fascist Network struggled to develop these solidarities with the black community, proposing that the latter was hostile to the local left following its conflictual relationship with Trotskyists, particularly during the Militant era and the Sam Bond affair, field notes (various), private correspondence (18/06/15), (Chapter 2).

<sup>243</sup> In one example, following LCC's plans to close or outsource mental health day-service provision in early 2014, a group of service users organised to form a campaign which they named *Save our Sanity* (see Moth *et al.*, 2015). One activist (a non-service-user) intervened in an early meeting and argued that the term 'sanity' should be replaced as it reproduced stigma around mental health. In defiance, service users committed to the name [anonymised], interview.

<sup>244</sup> Private correspondence (28/03/15).

<sup>245</sup> Field notes (03/03/15).

identifies the void within Liverpool left politics following the expulsion of Militant councillors in the late 1980s. Tony Mulhearn explains:

One of the problems has been the failure of the official movement to unify all the anti-austerity forces, unlike in our day when you had the joint shop-stewards committee, and the local authority trade unions who were a tremendous organising factor [...] So you're faced with unofficial bodies trying to organise the working class, which is always difficult without the support of the official structures. I think Liverpool against the Cuts has had a good programme on paper, the problem is the way it's organised; the lack of a stable leadership, the lack of a properly executive body, the lack of a stable chair and secretary.<sup>246</sup>

Former Militant and DLP secretary, Felicity Dowling, concurs:

You've got to go to so many meetings to know what's going on, there isn't a coherent recognised body, unlike in the old days where you had the District Labour Party. [But] we don't even have a calendar; you want to call a meeting in Liverpool, you have no idea whether somebody else will call a meeting on that date.<sup>247</sup>

In conclusion, the movement suffered a number of structural and strategic dysfunctions which hindered the coalition, and contributed to its inability to displace local elite discourses of austere realism and urban entrepreneurialism. Indeed, by late 2015, the movement – that is, the practice of these forces in effective collaboration – had largely burnt out, and had demobilised following the intensification of internal dysfunction, the associated failure to grow or diversify the movement, and the growing ability of LCC to manage austerity urbanism and its resulting political fallout. There was little political opportunity present, and activists had set unobtainable goals (Plows, 2004), while participation was hard work and drudgery and, for some, emotionally traumatic (Brown and Pickerill, 2009). These were all significant factors which would hinder the sustenance of anti-austerity activism over the longer term. Moreover, these strategies of resistance could really be seen to depend upon the concession of the council to activists' demands, and upon the strength of the trade unions in mobilising working-class forces. Yet, from an early stage, both of these avenues seemed implausible, and there was little concerted effort to move beyond this political impasse. Given the dominance of elite discourses, the rejection of any anti-austerity electoral mandate, and the inability to mobilise any significant forces, some have argued – notably the mayor – that activists do not speak for anyone but themselves; a reasonable conclusion being that no fresh political alternatives are emerging, and that local anti-austerity was typified by resistance but little else.

However, a closer and less politically prescriptive reading suggests something different. First, while the overt forms of resistance and class ruptures observable in the 1980s are not as

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<sup>246</sup> Tony Mulhearn, interview.

<sup>247</sup> Felicity Dowling, former Militant, Left Unity, LATC, interview.

present, from afar there is a number of productive openings emerging in the city which emphasise communities' 'power to' prefigure alternative futures within the context of austerity urbanism. These include diverse economies-style projects such as housing co-operatives (see Thompson, 2015), and the possibilities for the re-municipalisation of local services, as well as the radical potential posed through community devolution. There are possibilities, but perhaps activists are searching in the wrong place; as earlier outlined, what some read as manifestly post-political might instead constitute the germ of an alternative to neoliberalism (Larner, 2014; North *et al.*, 2017). Secondly, movement-building can be a slow, arduous, process; as Chapter 2 illustrated, Militant was a decades-long development. To that end, anti-austerity politics must be interpreted within a broader historical context, where simply the reproduction of this political assemblage over time constitutes a significant outcome of movement organising. Moreover, the experiences of Liverpool clearly cannot be isolated to factors at the city scale; austere realism is shaped locally, but is profoundly manifest across UK local authorities (Davies and Blanco, 2017). Indeed, a crowd of reportedly 5,000 people amassed to welcome Jeremy Corbyn to Liverpool in August 2016 (*Liverpool Echo*, 2016c), typifying the degree to which a mainstream anti-austerity critique continued to resonate with the Liverpudlian political imaginary (see *Figure 6.8*). The fact that this crowd was noticeably younger, more diverse, and welcomed a range of fresh voices to the political sphere<sup>248</sup> evidences a particular scalar dynamic which privileges anti-austerity politics waged at the national scale. Indeed, this fresh impetus of Momentum also signalled the death knell for many anti-austerity groups, whose individuals turned to Momentum as the most credible organisation for practicing anti-austerity politics at a variety of scales.

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<sup>248</sup> Field notes (01/08/16).





**Figure 6.8:** Jeremy Corbyn Rally in Liverpool, 1 August 2016 (Source: *Liverpool Echo*, 2016c).

## 6.7 Conclusions

This chapter has answered recent calls to engage critically with those actually existing forms of anti-austerity contestation. The chapter began by encouraging a shift away from growing post-political interpretations, which it identified as adept at explaining elite depoliticisation strategies from above, but too politically prescriptive and disempowering to engage with the myriad grassroots challenges to austerity on their own terms (Featherstone *et al.*, 2015; North *et al.*, 2017), where resistance is frequently posed as reactive, defensive or unproductive. Indeed, this more nuanced understanding has opened new insights, showing how spatially-situated actors and practices are integral to reshaping the political landscape and reworking the terms upon which austerity urbanism is enacted. While this account may read as less celebratory than those written from a southern European perspective (Arampatzi, 2017a; Douzinas, 2013), structuralist interpretations of austerity urbanism fail to tell the full story; such practices clearly are contested. This novel more-than-cuts approach recognises that rendering injustice visible and placing unequal power relations within the terrain of contestation are themselves productive outcomes of political activity which can reconfigure political and spatial imaginaries. It was also contended that the spatialities of resistance are integral to shaping political potentialities and limits, where three specific contentions were made. First, critiques of austerity and proposed alternatives reflect certain place frames. Secondly, this assemblage of political activity mobilised distinct strategies and action repertoires and, thirdly, place-based factors forced a number of structural and strategic

dysfunctions upon the movement. The chapter also reveals that anti-austerity cannot be contained within one analytical frame, and that a closer reading of the different forms of political identity formation is required. The final empirical chapter now turns to explore this in further detail.

## Chapter Seven

### **‘Radical’ Liverpool? Towards Place-Based Anti-Austerity Politics**

#### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter develops the ‘more-than-cuts’ framework introduced in Chapter 6 and applies it to actually existing forms of anti-austerity contestation by engaging with the different geographies of the anti-austerity assemblage. It promotes relational accounts of social movement activity which acknowledge place-based political struggles as being the result of the ongoing negotiation of multiple social relations and diverse networks through which new political identities, solidarities and antagonisms are generated (Featherstone, 2005, 2008; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). These perspectives also see resistance as defined according to the different political identities and solidarities that are produced, rather than merely being posed as oppositional to practices of domination (Featherstone, 2003; Massey, 2004). This approach holds that exposing the histories and geographies of past struggles, and the different political identities and agencies that they have produced, is central to crafting contemporary political imaginaries (Featherstone, 2008). The findings also contribute to the growing literature on the affective dimensions of (micro)political activity, which are increasingly understood not as by-products, but as major determinants of mobilisation processes (Brown and Yaffe, 2014; Davies, 2012). Whilst this thesis has already explored how grievances have been historically constructed and contested in Liverpool and, in so doing, has outlined scholarship on the contemporary ‘political imaginary’ of the city (Chapter 2), this chapter makes three key assertions. First, anti-austerity politics in Liverpool rely upon particular spatial imaginaries through which contestation is performed. Secondly, this assemblage is enacted through locally embedded knowledges and practices that reaffirm place as a productive spatial framework to analyse the micropolitics of movement activity. Thirdly, anti-austerity politics provide the vehicle through which new meanings of place (Massey, 2004) and new political identities and solidarities are produced, through the redrawing of new ‘maps of grievance’ (Featherstone, 2003). This chapter contributes to the thesis by further evidencing the extent to which anti-austerity politics cannot be contained within a single analytical framework, but must be read as more-than-cuts, and demonstrates the centrality of political identity re-formation and geographical imaginaries to social movement mobilisation processes, interpreted through a relational lens.

Section 7.2 reviews the geographical literature on the spatialities of contentious politics, and argues that there is a need to situate political formations, strategies and imaginaries within their respective geographical contexts. Section 7.3 analyses the particular spatial imaginaries

deployed by anti-austerity activists in Liverpool; 7.4 examines the (micro) processes of building, maintaining and reproducing anti-austerity politics in Liverpool; and section 7.5 considers the possibilities and limits for political identity (re)construction and new forms of place-making in Liverpool, returning to the notion of Liverpool 'exceptionalism' (Belchem, 2006a) identified in Chapter 2.

## 7.2 Theorising the Spatialities of Resistance

All forms of resistance exhibit particular geographies and interact with the spatiality of the world in different ways (Brown *et al.*, 2017; Nicholls, 2009). Indeed, the fundamental prerequisites of mobilisation – collective outrage, opportunity, solidarity, identity, trust and hope – are inextricably spatial phenomena (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1994; Soja, 1989), yet the analysis of space has been underdeveloped within social movement studies, while notions of space as merely a container for political action are still found in the contemporary literature (Nicholls, 2007, Sewell, 2001). Geographers, however, have sought to critically interrogate the relationship between social movements and space (Auyero, 2007; Koopman, 2015; Routledge, 2013), and a number of spatial concepts have been devised to promote this pursuit. Nicholls *et al.* (2013) broadly summarise the spatial evolution of the discipline as follows: between the 1930s and 1950s, the emphasis was on *region*; through the 1960s and 1970s, it was *space*; in the 1980s *place*; the 1990s and 2000s introduced *scale*; and the current epoch focuses upon networks, assemblage and mobility. This 'spatial turn' has led to a welcome focus on the different spatial strategies deployed by social movements with less, but growing, emphasis on how space, place, scale and networks shape the production of grievances, opportunities, resources and political identities (Featherstone, 2003; Martin and Miller, 2003; Routledge, 2003; Tilly, 2000). The privileging of certain spatial ontologies and epistemologies has also been subject to intense scholarly debate – where the literature has been charged with underplaying how these diverse spatialities are co-implicated – although consensus has begun to acknowledge that different geographical features play different functions within actually existing forms of contentious politics (Davies, 2012; Jessop *et al.*, 2008; Leitner *et al.*, 2008; Sheppard, 2002). The most relevant spatial lens to deploy therefore depends upon both the positionality of the researcher and movement actors, and on the particularities of movement activity itself (Martin, 2003, 2013; Nicholls *et al.*, 2013). It follows that this chapter attends to the actually existing forms of socio-spatial relations practiced by social movements themselves, rather than those spatialities that the analyst epistemologically seeks to privilege, for geography is salient for those engaged in activism, as well as those examining it (Leitner *et al.*, 2008).

Chapter 6 began to utilise the concept of place as a key spatial framework to understand movement mobilisation and political identity (re-)formation within Liverpoolian anti-austerity politics. Distinguishing between 'territorial' and 'relational' conceptions of place, those who advance the former standpoint argue that the processes through which social relations are (re)produced occur through distinct territorial units (Nicholls, 2009). For Agnew (1987), place is the site where: broader political and economic processes play out (*locations*); macro-level processes are met with microeconomic responses (*locale*); and particular spatial imaginaries form to provide a sense of meaning to individuals (*sense of place*). These definitions overlap and intersect to form the contexts through which particular social processes are realised, and identities, solidarities and political dispositions are formed and maintained (Cresswell, 1996). In turn, these guide individuals to identify particular grievances and make normative evaluations as to whether collective responses are merited, and which solidarities should be formed and maintained (Auyero, 2007; Wolford, 2004). Indeed, research has shown how political subjectivities and cultures are geographically embedded within place (see Chapter 2), and how these strengthen the relations of trust and solidarities necessary to unite activists around common political goals (Gould, 1993; Harvey, 1996; Markusen, 1987; Nicholls, 2003). Such place-based relations may, therefore, account for certain places responding differently to similar threats according to different political dispositions which allow for competing interpretations of those threats and the construction of grievances and solidarities (Douzinas, 2013; Martin, 2013). The contradictory character of place is discussed in Williams' (1989) notion of 'militant particularism', furthered by David Harvey (1996, 2000). Here, place is conceived as a crucial element for facilitating identities and solidarities while, simultaneously, these bonds – formed through particular struggles deeply-rooted in particular places – are threatened by the abstraction of local grievances to universal levels of abstraction. Harvey also identifies "profoundly conservative" forms of socialist politics which are embedded within, dependent upon, and perpetuate, the very social relations and solidarities forged by the oppressive industrial order that such struggles ultimately aim to overthrow (Harvey, 1995: 91).

Since contemporary urban movements have arguably expanded their action repertoires and diversified the spatial extent of their activities using networked and scalar strategies (Mayer, 2013; Routledge *et al.*, 2013; Tarrow, 2005), and many of the assumptions underlying the territorialist view of place have been deconstructed by a number of geographers (see Amin, 2004; Featherstone, 2005; Massey, 1994, 2004, 2005), territorialism as a spatial framework for analysing movement politics has largely fallen out of favour within the discipline. This has come at the expense of relational perspectives associated with networks and mobility (see Davies, 2012; Davies and Featherstone, 2013; Featherstone, 2003; Juris, 2008), although the prominence of the post-crash movements – and their associated space-taking repertoires – has

led to a renewed interest in territorial theorising (see Halvorsen, 2012, 2017). Relational contributions have called attention to how places are heterogeneously constituted through their relational interconnectivities, rather than being fixed, bounded entities with essential characteristics. Places are thus characterised by instability and flux, and are constantly reshaped through global flows of people, capital and ideas; they do not have singular or unique identities but are instead driven by internal conflict (Leitner *et al.*, 2008). Those who reside in a given location may share competing sociological attributes, histories, identities and mobilities, hence proximity may not necessarily produce shared political dispositions or affinities, and a person's sense of political community may instead be shared across space (Massey, 2005; Nicholls, 2008). Massey (1994) warned that territorial conceptions of place – based on homogeneous traditions and authentic/inauthentic forms of belonging – may instead fuel a politics of nostalgia and exclusion (see also Gilroy, 1987; Nicholls, 2009). Massey (2005) also considered the affective materiality of place, adding the role of the non-human to these place-making processes. In Liverpool, the distinctive maritime culture owes much to the vagaries of the tide (Higginson and Wailey, 2006). Thus, although places are sites of different bundled social relations, they should be critically understood in relation to other places and processes, rather than in isolation (Hetherington, 1998). Finally, the places where grievances are aired are not necessarily the same places where contentious politics play out, which depends upon particular geographies of political opportunity (Martin and Miller, 2003).

Where territorial notions conceive place-based struggles as essentially bounded forms of political activity defined in opposition to capital, relational understandings have sought to demonstrate how militant particularisms are instead constructed through connections to other struggles and places, and have reaffirmed the primacy of social movements themselves in defining and reshaping the terrains of resistance (Davies and Featherstone, 2013; della Porta *et al.*, 2013; Featherstone, 2003, 2005, 2008; Massey, 2004, 2005; Routledge, 1996). David Featherstone has been instrumental in deconstructing and reworking territorialist place-essentialism, arguing that such perspectives are “deeply damaging to radical political imaginaries” (Featherstone, 2008: 18; Massey, 2007) in the way that they negatively counterpose ‘local’ spaces of subaltern politics against the ‘global’ powers of neoliberal actors and capital flows (Featherstone, 2008). In relational accounts, militant particularisms are considered the result of the ongoing negotiation of multiple social relations and diverse networks through which new political identities and solidarities are generated, to the extent that place-based identities are produced through the *outcomes* of struggle rather than the origins (Featherstone, 2005; see also Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). It is, therefore, within the intersection of these different routes of resistance that alternative political imaginaries and practices are produced (Featherstone, 2003). This allows for a more iterative and less

politically prescriptive analysis of the relationship between place and political imaginaries, where the networks and connections between struggles, and the legacies of past struggles, are not determinative of, but help to frame, possibilities and limits for the construction of political identities (Featherstone, 2008). Featherstone's analysis is instructive in examining the continuity between past struggles and contemporary forms of contestation, not in ways which prescribe a fixed 'blueprint' for resistance, but in exposing how the multiple and diverse histories and geographies of resistance can provide frameworks for future acts of resistance and help to animate contemporary political imaginaries (Featherstone, 2005; Fominaya, 2013). In attempting to reconcile these competing perspectives, Davies (2012) has invoked the concept of assemblage to demonstrate how movements embody elements of both territorial and relational spatialities.

Finally, Chapter 6 concluded that a closer reading of the different forms of political identity formation is required, and a number of further contributions are valuable here. First, social movement theorists have been guilty of prescribing how movements should behave, without seeking to understand their creative and organic evolution (Featherstone, 1998; Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014). Secondly, individuals participate in protest and other forms of contentious politics for a multitude of reasons, in ways which problematise assumptions that place-based identities are the result of singular struggles with pre-defined strategies or goals (Davies and Featherstone, 2013). The same authors also demonstrate how the maintenance of particular ties or connections, while ostensibly mundane, actually constitutes a significant outcome of social movement organising through contributing towards the redrawing of new 'maps of grievance' (Featherstone, 2003; see also Auyero, 2007; Davies, 2012; Diani, 1992). Hence, regardless of their particularisms, political struggles can provide inspiration for other place-based struggles in ways which emphasise the productive potential of social movement mobilisation in reworking social relations and the political landscape (Davies and Featherstone, 2013; Featherstone, 2005). Finally, further research on the affective dimensions of politics has stressed the prominence of friendship (Davies, 2017b; Sitrin, 2006), performativity (Jackson and Valentine, 2017), emotions (Brown, 2013; Brown and Pickerill, 2009; Jasper, 1998; Juris, 2008) and story-telling (Selbin, 2010) as not mere by-products, but rather key determinants of mobilisation processes. These interventions allow for a more nuanced reading of social movement activity, where the micropolitics of such practices matter to the ways in which solidarities are enacted (Brown and Yaffe, 2014; Davies, 2012), and broaden our analytical lens for assessing the effectiveness of contentious politics beyond instrumentalist goal-orientated measures common within the literature (Arenas, 2015; Turbulence Collective, 2010). Instead, scholarship must be focused towards engaging with

social movements as lived spaces of encounter, possibility, contestation and conflict (Graeber, 2009; Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014; Maeckelbergh, 2009).

To summarise, all spatialities matter but their importance varies across different times, places and struggles. This chapter holds that critically engaging with those actually existing spatialities of movement activity, as well as the micropolitics of political identity formation, opens up more nuanced pathways for thinking through the relative successes, limits and outcomes of social movement organising. Following Featherstone (2015), by locating certain political formations and strategies within their particular geographical contexts, and understanding political imaginaries as being relationally produced through struggle and the associated solidarities, alliances and friendships that constitute political contestation, the significance of place to anti-austerity politics in Liverpool can be more fully understood.

### **7.3 Histories, Memories and Motivations**

This section examines how grassroots anti-austerity politics in Liverpool relies upon particular spatial and political imaginaries through which contestation is inspired and performed. These imaginaries allow individuals to make sense of, and to remould, their own political identities (7.3.1), and to motivate and inform their reasons for engaging in political struggle (7.3.2). This moves us beyond a structuralist analysis, using the dominant yardstick of 'success' or 'failure' to understand how, despite the ostensible unproductivity of the movement in relation to its interpreted goals, such activity is nonetheless profoundly transformative in the way that political identities and solidarities forged by movement participants are shaped and maintained. This focus begins to flesh out "what the protests are about for those who live them, and what they really mean" (Arenas, 2015: 2).

#### *7.3.1 Defining Political Identities*

In the first instance, many individuals cited the intergenerational transmission of politics through their Liverpudlian families as a crucial factor in the definition and development of their own political identities through their formative years. This included observing and even participating in political activities during their upbringing – such as rallies, pickets, and even direct action – as well as in less overt ways, such as simply engaging in political discussions within the family. The following quotations are indicative:

Well, I've always been involved in politics because it was in our family, [so] from a very early age. They were involved in the left movements, they were Trotskyists.<sup>249</sup>

My father was active on the docks when it was casual labour, and I think that's where I got my politics from. If there was a dispute on the ship then me Dad was the first to

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<sup>249</sup> Member of OSAC, interview.



walk off. I remember the first book he gave me to read was *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*! He was involved in the seamen's strike in Liverpool, after which he joined the Communist Party. I told him not to tell me mother cos me mother was a good Catholic!<sup>250</sup>

There was a lot of political discussions for me growing up about fairness and equality, and I had a good understanding of what was right and wrong, which is something that I try and pass on to my kids. I was brought up with a good understanding that injustice cannot be tolerated and that everyone's got a responsibility to try and fight injustice.<sup>251</sup>

Many recalled partaking in various political activities as children:

I suppose my background is quite typical to a lot of people in Liverpool who are active, I come from a very political family. Me dad was an AEEU<sup>252</sup> steward in Lucas' car factory when I was very young and was a member of the Workers Revolutionary Party for a few years. Me mum hasn't really been involved in that kind of way, but she's always been pretty political and there's always been a lot of political discussion in the house as I was growing up. My first memory of political activism was going fly posting with me dad when I was about six years of age. Me dad's a really good artist and he'd done a picture, a caricature of Maggie Thatcher, and we went round Walton fly posting – including the church door! – and I was supposed to be keeping lookout!<sup>253</sup>

The marches were amazing! I would take my little boy on them and there was a vibrancy, and I still see friends now and our children have grown up and have children of their own and they [ask], 'Do you remember the 'Maggie outs?' [The children] loved going, and brandishing flags and stuff.<sup>254</sup>

These early experiences, of an explicitly political upbringing, were reported as having helped to shape individuals' political identities and to have inspired, motivated and sustained their activism. Participants often discussed their feelings of responsibility for "keeping up the good fight"<sup>255</sup> and maintaining strong familial traditions of struggling against injustice. Not to be visible in the fight against austerity, regardless of whether or not their demands could be achieved, was to threaten the continuity of these Liverpoolian working-class traditions,<sup>256</sup> and the foundations of these political identities. This first supports research, albeit limited to voting patterns, which posits that an individuals' political views are shaped primarily during their formative years through parental leads and the social milieu (Ball, 2013; Butler and Stokes,

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<sup>250</sup> Member of *Sefton Park Save the Libraries*, interview. *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* (Tressell, [1914], 2005) is widely regarded as a classic piece of working-class literature. Published in 1914, it embarks upon a socialist critique of capitalism and the resulting socio-economic inequality of Edwardian England. For the seamen's strike of 1966 on Merseyside, see Lane (1987).

<sup>251</sup> Member of *LATC*, interview.

<sup>252</sup> The Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU), a British trade union.

<sup>253</sup> Member of *LATC*, interview.

<sup>254</sup> [Anonymised], interview. The 'Maggie outs!' refers to the regular chanting of 'Maggie, Maggie, Maggie; out, out, out!', in reference to the then prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, which was a familiar 1980s left protest chant, particularly in Liverpool, interviews (various).

<sup>255</sup> Member of *Unite CASA 567*, interview.

<sup>256</sup> Field notes (various).

1974). Jeffrey (2017) also develops this argument in relation to the religious cleavages which were transferred through familial connections within Liverpoolian families and facilitated early Conservative dominance in Liverpool (Chapter 2). These findings demonstrate that socialist politics are also intergenerationally transmitted within the city, whilst also providing a more nuanced examination of the ways in which particular movement repertoires – such as rallies and direct action, and even story-telling – serve as anchors of collective identity (Goodwin *et al.*, 2001; Melucci, 1989) and also reproduce political identities by allowing participants to locate themselves within the movement's topography (della Porta *et al.*, 2013; Johnston, 2016). Where accounts of transnational resistance have effectively demonstrated how particular connections are (re)made across space (Davies and Featherstone, 2013; Juris, 2008; Routledge *et al.*, 2013), this research also highlights the temporalities associated with social movement mobilisation, where formative political experiences are re-enacted and help to shape forms of contemporary resistance (Featherstone, 2008).

The 'long histories' discussed by Raymond Williams (1989) were also drawn upon to help participants make sense of their own political identities and formative experiences. This illustrates how aspects of past struggle can provide important reference points, or building blocks, for future acts of resistance, as well as in the (re)production of a common identity. For example:

A great aunty of mine set up the first contraceptive clinic in the north end of Liverpool, so there's lots of history [in my family]. Then my mum had an aunty who was widowed in World War One, her only child died in the flu epidemic that followed World War One, and she was the union organiser for the garment makers in Liverpool. My mum brought us up to scoff at anyone who said they weren't working class; '*They're stupid, of course they're working class!*'. I had an uncle and an aunty who ran one of the committee rooms for the Labour Party on election day, and my mum had been involved in the Young Christian Workers as a child; they used to sell papers on the docks.<sup>257</sup>

Me mum and dad were members of the Labour Party when I was a kid and I always had an interest. Me' grandad worked at Tate & Lyle's and he always told me what life was like in the union, and he was badly affected on a personal level by the closure of Tate & Lyle's because it was such a community. By the age of 18 I was a union rep in a large bank site of about 400 workers.<sup>258</sup>

Emerging themes were that activists in Liverpool identified with a strong working-class identity defined by an eagerness to fight against perceived injustice, and that participants were motivated to engage in activism in order to honour, and continue, the proud 'radical' political traditions of the city. This place-based political imaginary supports the scholarly literature

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<sup>257</sup> Felicity Dowling, former Militant, Left Unity, LATC, interview.

<sup>258</sup> Member of LATC, interview.

examined in Chapter 2, which poses Liverpool as a place of unique oppositional identity (Baxter, 1972; Belchem, 2006a, 2006b; Belchem and Biggs, 2011; Frost and North, 2013; Marren, 2016). Such discourses also emphasise the territorial aspects of place in relation to the geographical embeddedness of social movements, where the “experiences of class solidarities and gender relations” (Harvey, 2001: 176), formed through particular struggles in particular places, contribute to the construction of the necessary prerequisites – such as trust and solidarity – for movement mobilisation (Gould, 1993; Harvey, 1996; Nicholls, 2003). The fact that anti-austerity politics in Liverpool bore the workerism, paternalism and overall ambivalence towards identity politics (Chapter 6) characteristic of the specific working-class and leftist political sub-culture of the city (Chapter 2) can thus be partially explained through this familial and place-based transmission of politics.

Participants also invoked certain historic imaginaries of an ‘industrial community’,<sup>259</sup> as in the second quotation above, which romanticised the former strength of the labour movement and the strong sense of community which surrounded the workplace within the ‘golden age’ of the post-war consensus (Chapter 4). This is a perspective mired in nostalgia, which Srnicek and Williams (2015) argue is ultimately disempowering to the left. Yet, this imagined geography conflicts with the fact that Liverpool cannot be understood as a typically ‘industrial’ city (Marren, 2016). Moreover, paradoxically, the time in question was a period in which Liverpool’s economic decline was already under way. However, Srnicek and Williams (2015) underplay the importance of the deep-rooted solidarities and community relations forged within place that territorialist standpoints were keen to emphasise (Harvey, 1996; Williams, 1989), and which this research also uncovers. Selbin (2010) has also illustrated the centrality of stories and story-telling which, while never objectively ‘true’ – indeed, versions can change even across neighbourhoods – nonetheless constitute a form of resistance through which collectives construct a reservoir of views and values by which individuals can make sense of their own identities and (dis)associate themselves from others. In a similar vein, others discuss narratives as a ‘tool-kit’ of symbols, stories and world-views with which to envision certain futures, and to devise the necessary means to arrive there (Guzman-Concha, 2012; Tilly, 1978). Such tropes also served to bind the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ social movement perspectives discussed in Chapter 6 by providing a common identity across the assemblage which was otherwise characterised by conflict.<sup>260</sup> To this end, place can be conceived as a crucial element for facilitating the reproduction of Liverpoolian political identities performed in relation to

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<sup>259</sup> Interviews (various); field notes (various).

<sup>260</sup> Field notes (18/08/15).

anti-austerity; these identities were not by-products of struggle but were instead cited as major mobilising factors.

Other activists invoked more expansive narratives to explain their fierce commitment to social justice, hostility towards the establishment, and strong sense of community, some for example citing their Irish-Catholic roots:

I've always been a political animal without ever knowing it. Never party political, but from my earliest days I have had a real sense of right and wrong and a real sense of when something is wrong trying to put it right. I locate that within my Irish-Catholic background. I was brought up in a large, extended Irish-Catholic family; we looked out for each other family-wise, and I was brought up in a value-system where a great deal of emphasis was placed on honesty, telling the truth and caring for people. In hindsight, you see that you were operating within a political paradigm of evaluating right and wrong.<sup>261</sup>

This final quotation opens up more relational readings of place which emphasise how places are constituted through their relational interconnectivities and how militant particularisms are instead constructed through their connections to other struggles and places, both past and present (Featherstone, 2003, 2005, 2008). The above quotation therefore confirms familial transmission, but locates this within wider histories and geographies, such as British colonialism and its associated transnational connections, in co-constituting the traditions and place-based political identities which help to inform and sustain contemporary political resistance (Featherstone, 2008; Gilroy, 1987). This demonstrates that, unlike territorialist accounts, political identities and constellations are not fixed but instead constantly being remade and reinterpreted through political struggle (Featherstone, 2005). The fact that one activist's father participated in the seamen's strike in Liverpool, and after was encouraged to join the Communist Party, is a case in point. This also supports Belchem's (2006a) work on the way the scouse identity became shaped through the mass nineteenth-century immigration of the Irish. Furthermore, Liverpool's transnational connections were explicitly mobilised within the context of anti-fascist struggle, whose assemblage overlapped with that of anti-austerity (see 6.3, 7.5):

Liverpool is a global city. Liverpool is a multicultural city; influences from across the world have helped make the city world renowned for our culture and hospitality. Our football teams have players from many different countries. Musically, Liverpool has been influenced by many different cultures and has produced entertainers to prove it, including the Beatles.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> Member of LATC, interview.

<sup>262</sup> *Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network*, leaflet, (n.d.).

It is therefore important to recognise that activists summoned both territorial and relational spatialities in the mobilisation and (re)construction of their political identities (Davies, 2012; Jessop *et al.*, 2008; Leitner *et al.*, 2008). These identities are also not the inevitable result of resistance against processes of capital accumulation – despite being a movement that is notionally ‘anti’ – but represent the outcomes of intersections of different routes of resistance emerging in response to competing flows of capital, people, discourses and ideas enacted both in the past and in the present (see Chapter 2; Massey, 2004, 2005). Finally, activists clearly displayed a measure of agency in remoulding their identities and reshaping the terrain of resistance by, for example, responsabilising Liverpool City Council (LCC) for its embrace of austere realism and urban entrepreneurialism (see Chapter 6). This ability to renegotiate the scalar politics of austerity contests structuralist accounts, and illustrates the extent to which activists mobilised a range of spatialities as part of their action repertoires.

### 7.3.2 *Motivating and Sustaining Activism*

The first positioning of social movements viewed them as ‘irrational’ and studied them in order to prevent their reoccurrence, while the second wave, located in the Marxist tradition, was concerned with depicting social movements as collectives of rational actors calculating the costs and benefits associated with political participation (e.g. McAdam, 1982; McCarthy and Zald, 1977). In response to this economic reductionism, the third wave, known as New Social Movement (NSM) theory, sought to examine different motivations for activism with a focus on the types of identity that are produced within conflict and that influence collective action (Melucci, 1989; Touraine, 1981). This corpus emphasises the importance of symbolic action for social movements, allowing us to move beyond making normative assumptions of success/failure and towards a more nuanced reading which acknowledges that even a ‘failed’ revolt can produce a multitude of outcomes that have effects beyond a movement’s political demands (Scott, 1985, 1990). Haiven and Khasnabish (2014) further that, in order to commit to social movements as more than just sources of data, researchers should interrogate that which exists *in between* those dominant notions of success and failure. Indeed, rather than simply relay normative judgements about ‘what works’, movements should be read as an ideological outlet, a form of community, and as a source of identity. This illustrates the importance of studying social movement cultures, and attending to the lived experiences of movement participants (Melucci, 1989). This also entails a shift to the affective in turns of exploring ‘how’ an individual’s activism is motivated and sustained (Alexander, 2006).

This research thus identified a number of motivating factors, such as the empowering potential of activism, which allows individuals to externalise and politicise their everyday experiences explicitly. This is especially true of those service users engaging in activism who sought to

contest dominant narratives which demonise welfare recipients as 'dependent' and contribute to a climate of castigation which creates immense feelings of powerlessness and an overall hostility towards the poor and unemployed (O'Hara, 2014). This has further politically disempowering consequences whereby austerity politics become internalised, and individuals blame themselves for their own suffering (Hall, 2015). However, service users commented that resistance

can be therapeutic. It gives people a voice, when previously a lot of people who use welfare services feel disempowered in the current context, so even just being involved in a campaign – even if you're unsuccessful in a sense – gives you a platform with which to voice your experience and your opinions, and I think to realise that the things in your life that might be making you depressed or unhappy are the result of bigger socio-economic structures. That is quite an empowering feeling, rather than feeling like it's yourself that's to blame for your personal circumstances.<sup>263</sup>

Another service user activist described the potentially transformative benefits of engaging in activism:

In campaigns you get this feeling of being of much more value, it can reshape your identity. You aren't pigeonholed as just a person with mental health problems, you can be something else. You can experiment with different types of spaces as well, where you can start to get rid of power structures, people can interact with each other in a different way and understand their own experiences and their own position in society, which maybe they can't within existing services.<sup>264</sup>

Through activism, participants reported having overcome their shyness and their difficulties with public speaking, gaining more confidence as a result.<sup>265</sup> In line with that proposed by Moth *et al.* (2015), who also examined the *Save our Sanity* mental health services campaign in Liverpool, service users discussed developing a broader political awareness and engagement through their participation within the campaign, which formed an alliance between service users, council workers, trade unionists, and anti-austerity activists, and created new spaces for dialogue.<sup>266</sup> Other activists were also keen to emphasise the affective nature of struggle, in which, regardless of whether or not they achieved their original demands, it was considered important to "have had a go",<sup>267</sup> and to "take sides, to do what is right".<sup>268</sup> The following quotations are illustrative:

I realised a long-time ago that you've got to be seen to fight. It's about fighting; even if ultimately you don't win, at least you've had a pop. It's about resistance, it's about

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<sup>263</sup> Member of *Save our Sanity*, interview.

<sup>264</sup> [Anonymised], interview; private discussions (various).

<sup>265</sup> Private correspondence (13/04/15); private discussions (various).

<sup>266</sup> Field notes (24/05/15); see also Moth *et al.* (2015).

<sup>267</sup> Member of *OSAC*, interview.

<sup>268</sup> Member of *Unite CASA 567*, interview.

having a go, and it's about warning them off for next time so that it won't happen so easy. But a lot of it is symbolic, particularly in Liverpool.<sup>269</sup>

We need to campaign with people, to show solidarity with people, support people in practical ways as well in the day-to-day struggles because, as the old saying goes, 'if you don't fight, you're definitely gonna get a bloody nose!'; you're not gonna get anywhere, you're not gonna get any concessions, so obviously if you just give up and don't fight you'll get nothing, and it's better to go down fighting.<sup>270</sup>

I fight because somebody needs to and they can't get away with it. I don't necessarily fight because I think that I will win.<sup>271</sup>

These postulations suggest that what participants fight for, their reasons for doing so, and what kinds of future they ultimately envisage, are not always consistent concepts. Rather than measuring social movements against goal or demand-orientated measures, they must be understood as lived spaces of encounter and possibility (Graeber, 2009; Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014), and anti-austerity politics must be located within the framework of more-than-cuts. Many also defined their activism through a perceived responsibility for future generations of the working-class,<sup>272</sup> as well as through notions of an imagined activist community:

There's a core of members who live in the area who are very committed. The energy they put in means that it survives; people are prepared to do things. For example, at election time, I delivered thousands of leaflets, put in a massive amount of effort, because I knew that [anonymised] was doing just as much, or more, than I was doing. And I thought that, well, if [they] can do it then I can do it. And I think that other people feel like that. There is a good sense of camaraderie.<sup>273</sup>

Sharing a strong sense of responsibility towards the activist community was therefore a key motivating factor, as was the desire to uphold the status of Liverpool as a 'radical' or 'bolshie' city,<sup>274</sup> in ways that sought to enact the values and principles outlined in 7.3.1. Activists also expressed a concern with caring for others and contrasted the values of collectivism with the broader societal shift towards individualism, which was identified as characteristic of neoliberalism and "Tory-ideology".<sup>275</sup> This is evidenced by the fact that many activists justified their role in activism through the lens of other people's perceived suffering, rather than their own;<sup>276</sup> empathy was, therefore, a primary motivating factor, rather than the

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<sup>269</sup> Member of *LATC*, interview.

<sup>270</sup> Lesley Mahmood, former Militant, Member of *LATC*, Left Unity, interview.

<sup>271</sup> Member of *OSAC*, interview.

<sup>272</sup> Field notes (various).

<sup>273</sup> Member of *OSAC*, interview.

<sup>274</sup> Interviews (various).

<sup>275</sup> Interviews (various); private discussions (various).

<sup>276</sup> Field notes (27/04/15).

individual necessarily being personally affected.<sup>277</sup> However, the quotation also highlights the role of peer pressure within activism, where individuals may feel compelled to participate in order to sustain their inclusion, and to avoid their activist credentials being called into question (Brown and Pickerill, 2009). This was manifest in more or less subtle ways, for example privately questioning one's attendance at meetings or participation in action repertoires (e.g. leafleting), to even calling into account one's employment or lifestyle choices.<sup>278</sup> This led to contestation over who the 'real' or 'best' activists were, in ways which may have encouraged short-term participation, but also produced resentment and conflict, ultimately contributing to movement burn-out.

The research also highlighted the subjectivising tendencies of activism, however, where identities become co-implicated within the struggle itself. This links to Holloway's (2010) post-Marxist notion of forming 'cracks' within capitalism, as another participant opined:

We've got to keep trying these things; you might not win, but what you leave behind is key, like the dockers for instance. That is an example to everybody that if you put up a fight then you might lose the actual thing that you went out for, but the lasting legacy of the dockers [dispute] is that it builds up peoples self-esteem, courage and they're able to take on these struggles, and who's to say that because they lost out that time that they won't win in the long run. That's the way it's always been, the people who've gained have never really been the people who've put up the battle; you can go back in history and see that the people who've fought for stuff, most of them have not won but the generations after that are the ones that have benefitted from it.<sup>279</sup>

To this end, political struggle is conceived as a dialectic and iterative process where even though particular action repertoires may erode or dissolve, the significance is that which is left behind. This includes the possibilities for creating spaces in which groups can envisage alternative futures through the dissemination of normative values of justice, equality, dignity and wealth redistribution (della Porta *et al.*, 2013). It is also important here to recognise that while the movement milieu was dominantly framed through an 'old' left perspective ideologically hostile to poststructuralist and identity politics (Chapter 6), which would not typically stress the importance of conducting prefigurative politics – where the journey of struggle is considered to be as significant as the end (Chatterton, 2006) – there was also some recognition of the multiple potential outcomes arising from struggle. This included identity

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<sup>277</sup> While arguably all movement participants are in some way 'affected' by austerity (Hall, 2015), the assemblage was primarily constituted of those not 'bearing the brunt' of austerity measures (such as workfare, sanctions, unemployment and homelessness), as defined by the scholarly literature (O'Hara, 2014; Toynbee and Walker, 2015).

<sup>278</sup> Field notes (various). Confidentiality prevents further disclosure here.

<sup>279</sup> Member of *Sefton Park Save the Libraries*, interview.



(re-)formation, solidarities and the building and maintenance of political networks (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014; Scott, 1985, 1990).

This section has shown that anti-austerity politics in Liverpool require a deeper historical and geographical analysis in order to establish their origins, determinants of mobilisation, and the factors which continue to sustain activism. Section 7.3.1 depicted the political imaginaries through which contestation is inspired, and political identities are (re)made. Section 7.3.2 has begun to flesh out the different reasons why individuals partake in anti-austerity activism. This nuance is of critical importance for explaining why, given that participants themselves mostly recognised that their demands were unlikely to be realised, they nonetheless continued to engage in anti-austerity activism. This contributes to the more-than-cuts framework of this thesis in observing the significance and primacy of political identity (re)formation and geographical imaginaries to movement mobilisation processes. The next section turns to examine the geographical embeddedness of the assemblage, through which such movement practices were performed, in further detail.

#### **7.4 Keeping Things 'Moving'**

Chapter 6 outlined how the functioning of the movement can be read as an assemblage, where different social formations and relations temporarily cohered before dispersing again, and a shared political imaginary acted as an anchor for the convergence of people, materials, and discourses. The growing emphasis on relationality has advanced network approaches, and such perspectives have made valuable contributions in determining how transnational movements connect and are sustained across space (Diani and McAdam, 2003; Routledge, 2008). Yet such accounts tend to underplay the situatedness of the practices and geographies constituted through transnational contentious politics, instead focusing upon the 'flatness' of these geographies, at the expense of fuller considerations of the role of power and agency in movement processes (Davies and Featherstone, 2013). In response, Davies (2012: 275) has argued for the potential of assemblage theory in marrying territorial and relational perspectives to better understand how those "long histories and associations of people" produce places that are "more than just nodes or bundles of relations". This allows us to examine how those aforementioned socio-spatial relations are produced and preserved, and shows how movement actors were responsible for constantly building, maintaining and reshaping certain elements of this political left constellation. This section thus illustrates how the assemblage is enacted through at once locally embedded knowledges and practices, but which are continuously being redrawn in the production of new 'maps of grievance' (Featherstone, 2003). The section therefore explores the creation of those long histories and far-left associations of people in

Liverpool (7.4.1), and thereafter considers how they are sustained and remade through political activity (7.4.2).

#### 7.4.1 (Re)constructing the Assemblage

The politics of anti-austerity in Liverpool must be situated within the broader histories and geographies of the city discussed in Chapter 2. Chapter 6 demonstrated this in relation to the discourses produced and the alternatives to austerity that were imagined yet, in addition to this, anti-austerity politics must be located within an already existing, and deeply rooted, leftist assemblage of different political and social formations, which mobilise certain extant and latent political critiques. Placing anti-austerity politics in Liverpool as the partial product of broader historical struggles and political formations is not merely anecdotal, but integral to shaping grassroots forms of actually existing contestation, and illustrating how a more-than-cuts imaginary comes into being. In support of this, nearly all activists had a history of prior political involvement, and located themselves within a wider political assemblage within the city.<sup>280</sup> This personal history reflected both particularly Liverpoolian aspects – in the peculiar shape of the different far-left associations, such as the dominance of Militant – and a certain generational specificity, where predominantly middle-aged to elderly activists positioned their political roots in historical grassroots and industrial struggles within the city. For example:

I'm from a large family; me dad was a docker, me mum was a cleaner in the council buildings, and there [were] twelve of us living in what I'd say was a radical community. I've always been sort of socialist-based and active within the trade union movement, first as a steward and then a branch president. At one point I went to a meeting over the closure of a school, and from then on started looking at communities.<sup>281</sup>

I was first involved in the Young Socialists, and I was later involved in support for the councillors of the 1980s. I was also very involved in the campaign against the Poll Tax in the 1990s, and my most recent major involvement was in union work because I was the secretary of the Liverpool National Union of Teachers.<sup>282</sup>

The influence of Militant is profound:

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<sup>280</sup> Only a very small minority of activists described anti-austerity politics as their first political foray; for most participants austerity represented simply the latest class attack, field notes (various); private discussions (various).

<sup>281</sup> Phil Knibb, Chief Executive of Alt Valley Community Trust, interview. The school in question was Croxteth Comprehensive, where Phil Knibb was instrumental in leading the Croxteth Community Action Committee in order to save the school (see Chapter 2; also Taylor, 2011). Knibb was a Labour activist during the Militant era but, following the "disbanding of the local Labour Party" under Neil Kinnock, turned to concentrating on community development in the north end of Liverpool, interview.

<sup>282</sup> Member of *Sefton Park Save the Libraries*, interview. The *Labour Party Young Socialists* was led by Militant, and had a presence in Liverpool (Chapter 2). The Young Socialists in Merseyside learnt and benefitted from a "layer of experienced and respected Marxists who were [...] at the heart of the existing labour movement" (Johnson, 1996: 149).

I got involved in [Liverpool] politics via the trade union movement in the 1950s. I'd first done a short period at sea before I then became an apprentice cabinet-maker at the age of fifteen. I joined NUFTO, which was the National Union of Furniture Trade Operatives, and I used to collect the subs at the age of fifteen and take them up to the headquarters at the top of Roderick Road, so that was my first brush with the unions. [But] it was actually the great printers' strike of 1959 that I became really active in the union, and then got involved with the Labour Party and came across the ideas of Militant. Well, Militant didn't exist then; but the ideas of Trotskyism, [and] of revolutionary socialism, and I recognised that the industrial and the political wings were inseparable, and therefore I became an industrial activist, and a political activist, and joined the Labour Party.<sup>283</sup>

I became involved in the local party [Kirkdale] and got really interested in the local politics, and there was a couple of guys who I went the match with who were Militant members, and there was a guy who lived in the next street to me who I knew from the pub, and he was a Militant councillor; he was one of the 47.<sup>284</sup>

Ethnographic research also uncovered the vast array of struggles in which anti-austerity politics had roots, where, in addition to the above, participants also discussed being inspired by, or having a familial or personal involvement in: the 1966 seamen's strike; the factory occupations of the 1970s;<sup>285</sup> the 1972 Kirkby Rent Strike (*Figure 7.1*);<sup>286</sup> the 1983-87 Militant struggle; the 1995-1998 dockers' dispute and the associated Women of the Waterfront campaign (*Figure 7.2*);<sup>287</sup> the struggle to save the 1984 Garden Festival site;<sup>288</sup> and, more recently, the No More Blacklisting and Hillsborough Justice Campaigns. Activists had also been members of a wide variety of left and far-left political parties, including the Labour Party, the Workers Revolutionary Party, the Socialist Workers Party, and the Communist Party of Great Britain.<sup>289</sup> Many had experience of challenging (New) Labour in local elections from the early 1990s and thereafter.<sup>290</sup> However, these associations do not function as mere histories

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<sup>283</sup> Tony Mulhearn, former Militant, Socialist Party, *LATC*, interview. For more information on the strike, see his account in Taaffe and Mulhearn (1988).

<sup>284</sup> Member of *LATC*, interview. 'The 47' refers to the surcharged and expelled 47 Labour councillors in 1987; remembering, however, that only thirteen (Frost and North, 2013), or ten to sixteen (Marren, 2016), were Militant-affiliated.

<sup>285</sup> For example, Lesley Mahmood, former Militant and current Left Unity and *LATC* member, described spending Christmas Day in occupation at the Meccano factory, interview.

<sup>286</sup> Former Militant and DLP secretary, Felicity Dowling, notes that the rent strikes "weren't to do with Militant" and that "Militant was only one of many Marxist strands within Liverpool", interview (see Chapter 2).

<sup>287</sup> [Anonymised], interview; Lesley Mahmood, interview.

<sup>288</sup> This was discussed by Ritchie Hunter, who was active in *Sefton Park Save the Libraries* and *LATC*. Ritchie is the son of the late Bill Hunter, a Trotskyist activist and leader of the *International Socialist League*, which he formed in 1988 with Martin Ralph, a prominent member of *OSAC* (*Socialist Voice*, 2015b). For his autobiography, see Hunter (1998). This further evidences the degree of intergenerational transmission of politics in Liverpool, as well as the profundity of these leftist networks.

<sup>289</sup> Field notes (various). Militant, however, remained the most dominant influence on Merseyside.

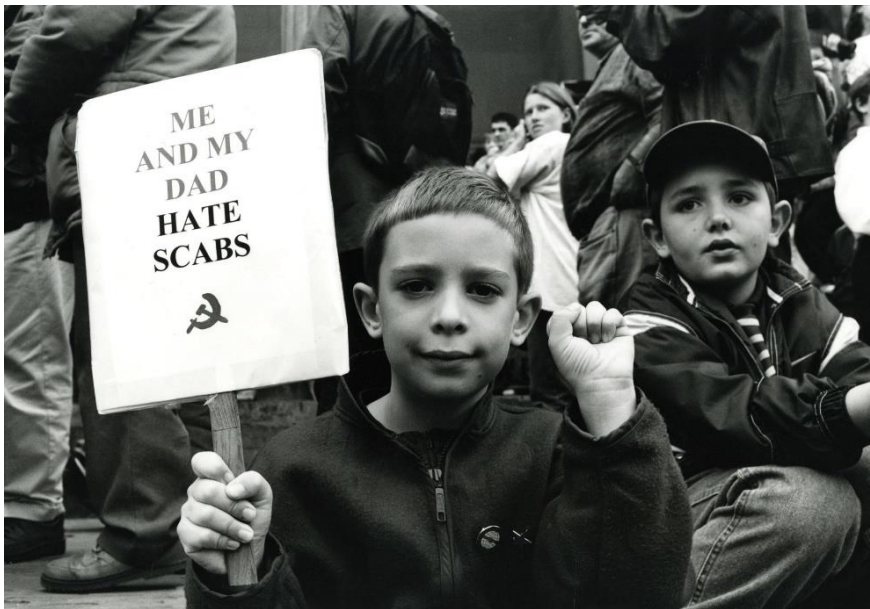
<sup>290</sup> Activists have stood for a range of independent socialist platforms or parties, including Militant Labour (Lesley Mahmood), Socialist Labour [anonymised], Socialist Alliance [anonymised], and the United Socialist Party [anonymised]. In some instances, married partners both have a history of political

or entry points into politics for individuals, but are instead constantly implicated in the reconstitution of contemporary left politics in the city, through the reshaping of networks, as the following interview comment illustrates:

Myself and others played such a high profile role within the sacked Liverpool dockers' dispute of 1995 onwards, in terms of delivering solidarity action to help their dispute, that I was approached by some of the ex-dockers themselves who were involved in discussing with *Unite* [the union] the concept of the community branch initiative.<sup>291</sup>



**Figure 7.1:** The Kirkby Rent Strike, 1972 (Source: LibCom, 2012).



**Figure 7.2:** Young Boy Supports the Dockers, n.d. (Source: Sinclair, 2014).

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involvement in Liverpool, including both standing as candidates, and this has also been the case for parents and their children, interviews (various).

<sup>291</sup> Steve Higginson, Branch Secretary of *Unite* CASA 567, interview; "Human Rights are Community Rights" *Unite* CASA 567, leaflet (n.d.).

In another example, one activist pushed for the exclusion of another from anti-fascist organising due to their previous links with the “white Trotskyist Left” in the 1980s. Despite this occurring over thirty years earlier, the activist argued that Trotskyists had alienated the black community of Liverpool at the time, and that such hostility and suspicion remained to the extent that their inclusion in the alliance would be problematic.<sup>292</sup> These examples show how the anti-austerity assemblage represents a fusion of different trajectories of resistance, past and present, with some more spatially extensive than others, where, at this intersection, new identities (‘anti-austerity’), solidarities and antagonisms begin to emerge. This is suggestive of the way that David Featherstone has theorised the concept of militant particularisms, where the networks and connections between different situated struggles help to frame the possibilities and limits for the (re)construction of political identities (Featherstone, 2003, 2005, 2008). Moreover, participants clearly display significant degrees of agency through the ways in which they negotiate the construction of these solidarities and antagonisms, for example in determining the appropriateness of different forms of alliance (Featherstone, 2003).

Enriching the more-than-cuts framework, it is apparent that anti-austerity cannot be read through an ahistorical approach, but nor can it be spoken through one campaign or organisation; rather, it represents the convergence of a plurality of struggles which pick up the residues of previous campaigns and constellations, develop and rework their discourses, and reshape political identities accordingly. Whether such struggles are conceivably ‘successful’ or not, they nonetheless rework the political terrain upon which other struggles will inevitably follow. To this end, for many individuals, anti-austerity represents an opportunity to reinvigorate Liverpoolian place-based left political identities and dormant political formations.<sup>293</sup> The concept of anti-austerity cannot, therefore, be described solely through the language of a ‘movement’ (e.g. Cox and Fominaya, 2013; della Porta, 2015; Worth, 2013), but is better theorised as an ‘idea’, or a nodal point of interaction, around which different place-based formations converge, simultaneously characterised by both solidarity and conflict. Yet, within these locally embedded knowledges and practices, new maps of grievance begin to emerge. This demonstrates the ways in which the long histories and highly particular far-left associations of people, ideas and things in Liverpool are of critical significance but not, perhaps, in the essentialist ways that territorial perspectives have previously conceptualised.

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<sup>292</sup> Private correspondence (16/06/15). Further context on relations between the black community and Militant can be accessed in Liverpool Black Caucus (1986), from the former standpoint, and Taaffe and Mulhearn (1988) for a defence from the latter.

<sup>293</sup> Member of LATC, interview. Section 7.5 expands upon this in further detail.

What is left to uncover, however, is the nuance of how and why such formations are sustained and remade, and it is to these issues the following section turns.

#### 7.4.2 *Sustaining the Assemblage*

Where section 7.4.1 discussed the presence of past struggle in this contemporary anti-austerity assemblage, the research also uncovered the significance of the affective dimension of political participation, which helps activists to maintain and reshape particular elements of this constellation. First, activists emphasised the social aspects of engaging in contentious politics as a key factor sustaining their activism, and this encompassed: escaping loneliness at home;<sup>294</sup> having the opportunity to share their political views with others and socialising with those “who understand what’s going on”;<sup>295</sup> rekindling former friendships and making new ones;<sup>296</sup> and having a strong sense of collective identity. This is not to understate the considerable degree of conflict that existed between different actors and organisations (see Chapter 6), but to emphasise that particular relations within this aggregation did share common bonds that served to facilitate their participation. In the case of *Old Swan against the Cuts* (OSAC), one participant explained:

There is a good sense of camaraderie; there’s four or five people who live on the same street [...] I also think that the nature of Old Swan as an area makes a difference. It’s a working-class area which has still got a degree of social cohesion that’s not been completely devastated like Kenny [Kensington] has. I also think that the amount of effort that people put in attracts people from other areas, the fact that we’re actually doing stuff; if one of us comes in and says ‘I’ve been sanctioned’,<sup>297</sup> then we’re out leafleting the next day outside his job centre – which is what happened at one stage. So I think that that level of energy attracts people from other places.<sup>298</sup>

This account richly exemplifies many of the affective experiences of anti-austerity activists in Liverpool. In Old Swan, almost half of the ‘core’ of the group inhabited the same street, and others lived within close proximity. This fostered close interaction and enabled high degrees of trust, comradeship and friendship to flourish (see *Figure 7.3*). In the case of the Paris Commune, Gould (1993, 1995) posits that neighbourhood networks and solidarities proved more important in determining mobilisation than a common class identity. The start-up of OSAC shows how neighbourhood networks function:

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<sup>294</sup> [Anonymised], interview.

<sup>295</sup> Member of LATC, interview.

<sup>296</sup> Many participants expressed their pleasure in having renewed contact with former comrades, where one or both parties had been politically inactive for some time, or in having made new friendships with other activists, both old and new, interviews (various); field notes (various).

<sup>297</sup> Benefit sanctions are penalties which reduce, suspend or end access to certain welfare services if the recipient does not meet the behavioural requirements.

<sup>298</sup> Member of OSAC, interview; benefit sanctions protest at Eaton Road, field notes (12/12/14); OSAC meeting agenda (10/12/14); *Socialist Voice* (2015b).

We were very busy and we weren't particularly active at that point in Old Swan, although we had been standing against the Labour Party as the left-wing, either as the Socialist Alliance or as TUSC, so we had that experience, and out of that we had some contacts. [Activist 1] and [Activist 2] were outside Old Swan Library and then [Activist 3] was walking by – we didn't know [Activist 3] at the time, and she didn't know [Activists 1 & 2]. She started talking to them, and she joined what became an anti-cuts group, though it didn't have a name. [Activist 3] used her contacts and got speakers for a first public meeting [...] The people who were running Old Swan Youth Club had lost all their council funding, so they invited us to go and meet and made us feel very welcome.<sup>299</sup>



**Figure 7.3:** OSAC Protest at Old Swan Library, n.d. (Source: Anon., n.d.).

Here, the creation of OSAC depended upon certain place-based networks which facilitated the mobilisation of resources (Nicholls, 2003),<sup>300</sup> and the building of social capital, where face-to-face relations are essential for fostering community participation (Putnam, 2000). From the quotation, we can see how people, resources, organisations and discourses are perceived to converge into specific social formations which are constitutive of the assemblage; indeed, that the local youth club – whose own existence was threatened following council cuts – provided a meeting place for the group is significant, in the way that such services become implicated in grassroots struggles against austerity. Furthermore:

<sup>299</sup> Martin Ralph, ward councillor candidate representing OSAC, interview. The 'we' refers to another husband-and-wife politically active team; *Socialist Voice* (2015a).

<sup>300</sup> This included a free-of-charge meeting venue, finance and other facilities (e.g. printing) from trade unions, and the convergence of individuals with different levels of social capital, skills, experience and contacts, field notes (various).



People would come and visit us; we had a young Brazilian come for a few months, and since then we've had another two Brazilians. One of them came to Old Swan the first year we formed, and then he came back the second year, and he commented that the atmosphere in the group had changed a great deal; he noticed that we were much more confident, and that everyone wants to say something.<sup>301</sup>

This comment further highlights the social dimension of political participation, and the importance of notions such as comradeship, friendship and emotions to political mobilisation (Brown and Pickerill, 2009; Davies, 2017b; Featherstone, 2012). That said, OSAC also attracted activists from beyond the neighbourhood scale, such as other parts of Liverpool,<sup>302</sup> and the group was also committed to grassroots internationalism,<sup>303</sup> further illustrating their spatial scope and the extent to which new solidarities emerged (e.g. visits to and from Brazil). Therefore, contra Gould (1993), in addition to those neighbourhood networks, class was still a key determinant for movement mobilisation:

The character of the group essentially is that it is a workers' group cos Old Swan is a working-class area; there used to be a lot of industries, a lot of factories around the area, and a lot of the older people who started to come to the group and stay with us have had their own experiences of organising in factories and what it was like to work in sometimes very bad conditions; people whose husbands were dock workers and so on. So there is that kind of class feeling, and class nature of the group, which is very important because obviously we must make those connections with the traditions of the working class as an essential element of building an anti-cuts movement.<sup>304</sup>

The shared working-class character of the group was thus identified as a major factor for building and sustaining a common identity around which comradeship, friendship, trust and respect was developed in Old Swan.<sup>305</sup> This common identity was shared across the city as a whole (6.4.1) – with conflict more concentrated on questions of strategy – and helped to unite a relatively small group of activists with no coherent or effective organisational body, although this workerism was unproductive in forging links with the (albeit underdeveloped) student political milieu within the city.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> Member of OSAC, interview; *Socialist Voice* (2015a).

<sup>302</sup> Sometimes as many as half of meeting attendees were from Liverpool, but were not based in Old Swan. Many committed to participate in actions there due to the spirit of comradeship that had formed, interviews (various). The group also forged links with Left Unity in nearby Stockport, field notes (03/03/16).

<sup>303</sup> Members of the *International Socialist League* were instrumental in forging these connections, and were also highly active in OSAC, field notes (various).

<sup>304</sup> Member of OSAC, interview.

<sup>305</sup> Field notes (various).

<sup>306</sup> Field notes (various). In more than one LATC meeting, local activists positioned students as adversaries rather than comrades where, for example, it was proposed that students received preferential treatment from LCC, were responsible for the gentrification of the city, and that they should pay council tax. One article in grassroots activist magazine *Nerve*, where students' interests are pitted against those of pensioners, and students' contributions to the city are questioned, also exemplifies this (Issue 26, May 2016).



Finally, activists enacted a series of tacit methods for sustaining the political imaginary of the assemblage and reproducing its cultural milieu, of which the most significant was visiting the pub following meetings. While ostensibly just providing activists with the opportunity simply to wind down following long, often gruelling meetings,<sup>307</sup> this seemingly insignificant and 'informal' movement repertoire nevertheless played a substantial role in the building and maintenance of the assemblage, through which participants were able to discuss proposals, (re)build solidarities, identify new adversaries, (re)negotiate conflict, and determine new repertoires and methods for (re)building the milieu.<sup>308</sup> Occasional fundraisers, and out-of-meeting working groups and conference organisation, also offered opportunities where activists shared contact in ways more conducive to (re)building trust and friendship.<sup>309</sup> Individuals often lent one another political literature, which added a discursive element to the ways in which different movement actors were enabled to engage with, and share, new forms of political knowledge (see *Figure 7.4*).<sup>310</sup> However, lending books also emphasises the materiality of assemblage relations, where the physical properties of the book hold an agency which can reshape and (re)produce, or "enchant", political actors (Bennett, 2001: 5; Burrell, 2011). This all contributed to the drawing of new maps of grievance, as the shape and form of this anti-austerity constellation was constantly in flux during the period of research.

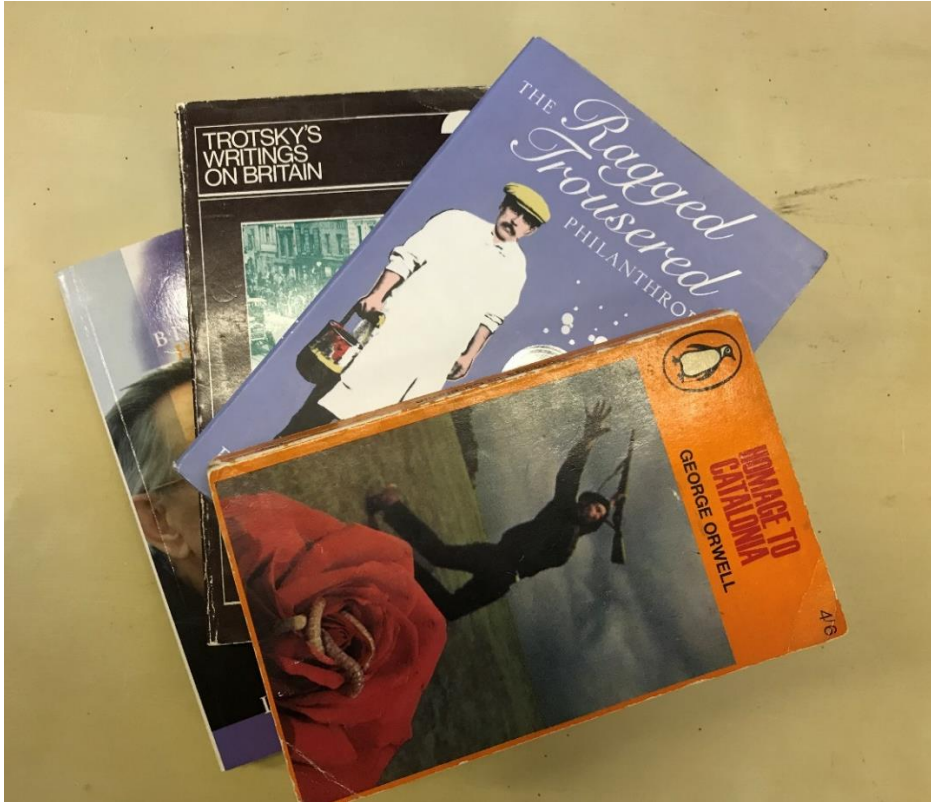
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<sup>307</sup> For example, monthly meetings at *LATC* would last for almost three hours, and continue up until 9pm on a weekday evening, and could often be highly fractious affairs, field notes (various).

<sup>308</sup> The significance of these pub visits cannot be understated. Sometimes invitations would be openly extended to the whole meeting and, on other occasions, depending on particular movement dynamics, these events would be organised more covertly. No one organisation was responsible, yet while some informal caucusing was apparent, these clusters more reflected friendships across the assemblage. These repertoires did, however, typically exclude non-drinkers, the disabled, those with care-giving responsibilities, and others unable to commit to socialising at this late hour, field notes (various).

<sup>309</sup> For example, the *Merseyside Anti-Fascist Network* held a conference and fundraiser gig, field notes (06/12/15); the 'No Austerity' conference in February 2015 involved a range of informal organising meetings and spontaneous meetings, field notes (29/01/15).

<sup>310</sup> I was approached on many occasions and offered, unprompted, different books. Some diverse examples include Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* [1938] (1966), a book on blacklisting (Smith and Chamberlain, 2015), *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* (Tressell [1914], 2005) and the autobiography of the previously mentioned, Liverpool-based Trotskyist, Bill Hunter (Hunter, 1998).



**Figure 7.4:** Exchange of Political Literature: Books Lent to Author (Source: Author).

Activists also cited concerns over a perceived break in the intergenerational transmission of the traditions and culture of the working class. As previously discussed, these repertoires intended to resolve that problematic through reproducing the radical cultural milieu (this is further examined in 7.5). The research also shows how these networks are effectively maintained during their less active phases, so that when movements do eventually become visible they are always rooted in the movement networks that generated them (Goodwin *et al.*, 2001; Melucci, 1989). This current section also critiques the goal-orientated focus common within the literature, and supports the increasing emphasis on the affective dimensions of political participation, which shows how friendship, emotions, story-telling and other experiences or repertoires are not mere by-products, but instead major determinants of mobilisation processes. This also allows us to locate the spaces of contentious politics as rife with possibilities, contestation and conflict (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014). Hence, while there is a dominant political imaginary at play (Chapter 6), participation also relies upon the material networks, solidarities and friendships that emerge during the context of struggle, contesting structuralist accounts which position resistance as always already defined against dominant power relations. The final section now turns to further consider Liverpool as a site of unique possibilities and limits for enacting contentious politics.

## 7.5 A Case of Liverpool Exceptionalism?

This chapter's final assertion is that anti-austerity politics in Liverpool provide a vehicle through which normative meanings of place were articulated, and new political identities and solidarities emerged. Returning to the framework of Liverpool exceptionalism, the chapter highlights how the imagined and contested geographies of place became implicated within grassroots resistance, both in terms of the different articulations over what place is, or should be (7.5.1), and the critical role of place in shaping political possibilities and limits (7.5.2). These two sections further underline the importance of adopting a more-than-cuts approach to the analysis of contemporary forms of anti-austerity resistance, where the assemblage drew new maps of grievance and transcended the immediate politics of austerity.

### 7.5.1 Grassroots Anti-Austerity as Place-Making

Outlined in Chapter 2, Liverpool exceptionalism embraces an identity which is marginalised from, and oppositional to, the larger British identity, where the notion of 'exceptional' refers to the city of Liverpool and its scouse inhabitants as being different from even the British working class in general (Belchem, 2006a, 2006b). Many activists drew upon such discourses in order to frame their participation in the assemblage, for example:

Liverpool has the character where people fight back. I think that we're anarchic, and so to be anarchic means that we stick two fingers up to the establishment, so when the [1983-87] Labour council wouldn't set the budget, even those people who weren't Militant supporters thought 'I'll have a bit of that!' because it's something in our DNA, and that's what I love.<sup>311</sup>

Reflecting the mood of the time in question, one Liberal canvasser reported being told: "I can't stand the Militant. But at least someone is standing up to the Bitch in London" (quoted in Parkinson, 1985: 67), whilst a senior shop steward at Ford's told Hilary Wainwright that "it's our city that's under attack [...] every scouser loves Scouseland, they regard it as *their* city. That's what was at stake" (Wainwright, 1987: 130). From such exchanges, we can observe the framing of anti-austerity politics as a consequence of a certain Liverpoolian exceptionalism that also reflects a broader historical tendency within the city's political imaginary that is explained through biology, in locating those anarchic tendencies within the city's DNA. Therefore, activists typically invoked these deep-rooted histories of struggle and their associated networks and associations of people in order to describe the collective identity of Liverpool as anarchic, anti-establishment, "radical", "bolshie", and "an edgy city".<sup>312</sup> This acted as a source of inspiration for participants, where even activists from outside the city drew

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<sup>311</sup> [Anonymised], interview.

<sup>312</sup> Members of LATC, interviews (various).

upon these imagined geographies in order to differentiate Liverpool from other cities in the UK; as one individual proclaimed: "I *really* like it here. People want to fight, and they have a strong sense of justice".<sup>313</sup> Hence, assemblage actors were keen to iterate normative claims about place; for example, Labour councillors were posed as "sell-outs"<sup>314</sup> for enacting rather than contesting 'Tory austerity', in ways which implied that they had "betrayed the people of Liverpool",<sup>315</sup> and activists claimed that, should government commissioners try to enter the city – in a hypothetical scenario where LCC had set an illegal budget – then the people of Liverpool "would proudly protect the city"<sup>316</sup> by blocking their access. These examples show how place, politics and identity intersect, and illustrate how notions of place are strategically mobilised within the context of contentious politics (Brown and Yaffe, 2014; Martin, 2013).

Yet, events around the counter-demonstration against the presence of the neo-Nazi groupuscule, *National Action*, which led the provocatively titled 'White Man March' in August 2015, go further in exemplifying the mobilisation of Liverpool exceptionalism as a set of imagined geographies. Resistance to the demonstration saw a nationwide mobilisation of anti-fascist groups join hundreds of local people – including trade unionists, socialists and anti-austerity activists, alongside football 'casuals', members of the black community, committed anti-fascists and passers-by, the young and old and more – in blockading the fascists in a lost luggage facility in Liverpool Lime Street station and preventing the march from taking place (see *Figures 7.5 and 7.6*).<sup>317</sup> National Action's subsequent attempts to return to the city have been met with an equally hostile response by similarly diverse forms of mobilisation.<sup>318</sup> In Liverpool, there is a significant degree of intertwining of anti-austerity and anti-fascist struggles across the assemblage, although the latter was able to mobilise a broader base of support including councillors. Here, the collective identity of Liverpool was celebrated and became implicated within this resistance, and also allowed for a crucial, albeit temporary, moment of unity between anti-austerity activists and local elites:

When fascism expresses itself in its most obvious and blatant form, like the White Man March, then there is some sort of an instinctive reaction in Liverpool; people say 'No!'. But it's instinctive, rather than a more politically elaborate discourse, that brings people to the streets.<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> [Anonymised], interview.

<sup>314</sup> Member of *LATC*, interview; field notes (various).

<sup>315</sup> Member of *LATC*, interview.

<sup>316</sup> Member of *Unite Casa 567*, interview.

<sup>317</sup> Field notes (16/08/15). The football 'casuals' represent a subculture of match-going football supporters. Liverpool Lime Street is the main railway station serving the city.

<sup>318</sup> Field notes (12/09/15, 28/02/16). The far-right movement *English Defence League (EDL)* attempted to march in Liverpool in June 2017. Their demonstration was opposed by hundreds of anti-fascists, field notes (04/06/17).

<sup>319</sup> Member of *LATC*, interview.



**Figure 7.5:** 'Nans against the Nazis': Anti-Fascist Counter-Demonstration, 15 August 2015 (Source: *Liverpool Echo*, 2015j).



**Figure 7.6:** Anti-Fascists Blockade National Action in Liverpool Lime Street Station, 15 August 2015 (Source: Anon., 2015).

In contrast to the relative lack of popular struggle over anti-austerity, anti-fascism was able to mobilise an 'instinctive reaction' against what was perceived as an affront to these imagined geographies of the city. Taking the example of defending library closures, Hitchen (2016) has described the slow, erosive degeneration of public services at the hands of austerity as 'the creep', a process which has profoundly disempowering consequences for building resistance. Fascist mobilisations, meanwhile, strike at the heart of the city's political identity. A range of repertoires valorised the significance of Liverpool's place-based identity in relation to the rejection of fascism, such as the football-style chants that echoed around Liverpool Lime Street



('Liverpool, Liverpool!'), as well as the banners and placards on show (Figure 7.7).<sup>320</sup> The event quickly became a viral sensation that penetrated social media, as well as reaching a range of national and international news outlets.<sup>321</sup>



**Figure 7.7:** 'No Place for Nazis' Banner from the Anti-Fascist Counter-Demonstration, 15 August 2015 (Source: Anon., 2015).

The *Independent* reasoned that the march failed largely because "National Action took on the wrong crowd: scousers",<sup>322</sup> while Liverpool's Mayor, Joe Anderson, remarked that:

I think the reaction that they got in the city was not unexpected. I think the city is, for me, a city that is proud of its tag that we are called 'the world in one city'. I think whenever the city is bullied or intimidated or threatened, we all come together and we stand together. I was proud of the fact that the city came together and stood together to show them they were always going to be outnumbered by thousands to one in this city.<sup>323</sup>

However, this dominant framing omits the fact that some of National Action's most prominent members reside, and are active, in Liverpool.<sup>324</sup> These examples demonstrate how particular invocations and partial stories of the political identity of the city are mobilised to (re)produce

<sup>320</sup> Field notes (16/08/15).

<sup>321</sup> For example, the *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Mail* and the *Independent* reported the event, as did internationally popular news websites such as the *Huffington Post*, *Buzzfeed* and *RT UK*. The event was also widely covered on Twitter, see #whitemanmarch.

<sup>322</sup> *Independent* (2015).

<sup>323</sup> Joe Anderson (quoted in *Liverpool Echo*, 2015k: n.p.).

<sup>324</sup> In 2014, a Liverpool-based National Action member was jailed for four weeks for sending anti-Semitic tweets to Liverpool Wavertree MP, Luciana Berger (*Liverpool Echo*, 2014b). In November 2016, stickers labelled "Nazi controlled zone" appeared across south Liverpool neighbourhoods (*Liverpool Echo*, 2016d).

collective identities, and are deployed in the construction of distinct action repertoires, which in turn produce new spaces, forms or meanings that can reaffirm or contest place-based imaginaries (Arampatzi, 2017b; Brown *et al.*, 2017; Leitner *et al.*, 2008). As per the quotation above, this political imaginary functions not as a coherent project, but rather as an instinctive reaction whereby no one organisation is singularly responsible for propagating this imaginary, but the assemblage operates to allow these disparate actors to converge around a seemingly 'spontaneous' reaction. Moreover, whether or not Liverpool does indeed represent an exceptional site of anti-fascist sentiment – particularly in light of its disputable record of recognising its own historic 'geographies of responsibility' (Massey, 2004; North, 2010) – misses the point, for what is significant is the way in which ideas and stories about the nature of the city are told (Selbin, 2010), and how, thereafter, these stories themselves become implicated into this broader assemblage of resistance. These discourses are always partial and elide many of the conflicts discussed in Chapter 6, such as UKIP gaining more votes than the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) in the ethnically diverse electoral ward of Prince's Park, which constitutes much of L8.<sup>325</sup> Furthermore, although the events of August 2015 represented a moment of ostensible consensus between activists and the mayor over what the contemporary Liverpoolian identity is, anti-austerity activists also sought to make fresh appeals to place, which fundamentally challenged the viewpoint of the mayor as expressed in Chapter 5 (5.4.1):

Do we want to have a fair and equal society? We've got to look to football; do we like what's going on with Liverpool and Everton Football Clubs on an ownership level? Is that what we're supposed to stand for? Cos football is a big chapter in Liverpool's history and Liverpool's life. What are you going to do with the refugees and immigrants? Cos Liverpool was built on immigrants and refugees. I can't see any clear stance or a clear direction to get the people of Liverpool behind a certain project and behind a certain world view. I would expect someone who is focused, who is passionate about Liverpool, and in a position of power, to project the view of a certain type of society and to get people behind it at a grassroots level. Going to the people and saying 'right, how do you want to run your community?', 'how do you want to run your city?', 'how do you want to look out to the world?' and so on.<sup>326</sup>

Within such narratives, activists' conceptions of place are more spatially expansive and can be productive of new relations and solidarities between different places and subaltern groups. This resonates with the progressive localism theorised by Featherstone *et al.* (2012), where place-based imaginaries such as those identified in Liverpool are not merely defensive, but can constitute more outward-looking forms of place-based politics which reconcile militant

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<sup>325</sup> This concern was cited by a member of LATC, interview (see 6.5.3). Historically, Liverpool has not been unwelcome to the Tories (Chapter 2). For the election results, see Liverpool City Council (2015b).

<sup>326</sup> Member of LATC, interview.

particularisms with the routes of other forms of resistance in ways which open up new maps of grievance. While Chapter 6 posed the practices of Liverpool's anti-austerity assemblage as somewhat limited in this regard, the above quotation shows the potential for (re)articulating meanings of place through the lens of anti-austerity. As such, proponents of this viewpoint sought to establish more outward-looking articulations of Liverpool exceptionalism which interrogated, within a politics of responsibility, what the city, as a place, 'stands for' and on what terms Liverpool is connected to other places and struggles (Massey, 2004, 2007). This also emphasises the productive potential of place-based struggles in challenging global processes where, aligned with sympathetic voices in power and focused upon developing the 'power to', greater democratisation can challenge socio-spatial inequalities.<sup>327</sup> This all demonstrates how, through the politics of both anti-austerity and anti-fascism in Liverpool, activists invoked a normative spatial imaginary about what the city should look like, and responsibilised LCC to enact these progressive localisms. This further validates the more-than-cuts framework, and illustrates the extent to which place remained a key site of conflict within the context of struggle.

### 7.5.2 *Reconstructing Political Identities*

The final section of this chapter examines the opportunities and limits forged through these new maps of grievance, and explores the extent to which the mobilisation of a Liverpool exceptionalism was essential to performing anti-austerity politics. In so doing, it demonstrates that, while the histories and geographies of past struggles matter for the (re)construction of political identities (Featherstone, 2008), the peculiarities of contemporary forms of resistance, as well as the solidarities they forge, also help to shape the possibilities and limits for future acts of contention.

As previously noted, for many activists, anti-austerity politics represented an opportunity to reinvigorate place-based political identities and dormant political formations; this is evidenced by the degree to which many participants described being politically inactive for many years, until the onset of austerity, and having since reconnected with former comrades who had also vacated this local political milieu.<sup>328</sup> In like manner, many new participants described their activism as having given rise to a new form of political consciousness.<sup>329</sup> This resonates with a radically different style of 'austerity as opportunity' to that expressed in 5.3.3, where the emergence of austerity provided potentialities to construct new left identities – around 'anti-austerity' – and form new political formations. This is also evidenced through participants'

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<sup>327</sup> The experiences of Barcelona en Comú are enlightening here (see Russell and Reyes, 2017).

<sup>328</sup> Interviews (various).

<sup>329</sup> Interviews (various); see discussions with *Save our Sanity* activists on p. 185.



attempts to diversify the assemblage, implicate ethnic minorities and young people in the struggle, and reach out across space.<sup>330</sup> However, some activists were keen to reject the notion of Liverpool exceptionalism, and proposed that it instead functioned to set limits upon the possibilities for solidarity-building:

For everything that's happened in Liverpool you can find an example from another city. So, for example, the E15 housing movement in London, the strikes in Wigan over Hovis, and in many other places, you can find examples. I think it can become a very negative thing to think of Liverpool exceptionalism.<sup>331</sup>

People say, 'it's the Liverpool mentality', but the reality is that there were some cities in the same position as Liverpool [in 1983]. I mean Liverpool was slightly worse off, but the difference was one of leadership; in most other urban cities a similar struggle could have taken place, provided leadership was given.<sup>332</sup>

This rejection of Liverpool as a place of exceptionalism argues that the city could not be conceived as especially radical, and that such perspectives were simply romanticised or nostalgic. From a Trotskyist perspective, such accounts typically emphasised the importance of strong and effective leadership, but this view was also present in community activists' accounts, as in the anarchist's quotation above. Instead, such standpoints proposed that the production and perpetuation of Liverpool exceptionalism is merely a political construction located within a specific historical moment:

I think that it's wrong to equate the two times; we had a functioning trade union movement, a functioning Labour Party which had roots in the communities, roots in the area, and there was solidarity amongst working-class people.<sup>333</sup>

[Militant] didn't happen overnight, it was done by doing loads and loads of energetic canvassing; we went round every single factory on every single industrial estate, there wasn't a part of Liverpool that we hadn't canvassed. I remember going back to the same streets where people had previously been hostile; they'd see that things were moving on the council, and now people started to listen.<sup>334</sup>

You had effective Labour Party wards in most places, there was big political discussion going on. It became a joke on the buses that someone would get on the bus and say, 'Have you heard how the vote went on the NALGO branch, mate?' and someone on the bus would go, 'Yeah, it went this way!' Everything was in the air, there was a real atmosphere there.<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>330</sup> See p. 154.

<sup>331</sup> Member of OSAC, self-identified anarchist, interview.

<sup>332</sup> Tony Mulhearn, former Militant, Socialist Party, LATC, interview.

<sup>333</sup> Felicity Dowling, former Militant, Left Unity, LATC, interview.

<sup>334</sup> Lesley Mahmood, former Militant and current Left Unity and LATC member, interview.

<sup>335</sup> Felicity Dowling, interview. The National and Local Government Officers Association (NALGO) was a British trade union, which merged into UNISON in 1993.

[But] the last few years of neoliberalism has very effectively got rid of that, although it is gradually being rebuilt. For instance, we're really proud of Old Swan against the Cuts, but that's only in one ward; there would have been ward parties doing that in every part of the city [in the mid-1980s].<sup>336</sup>

That can't happen today, because the battering that the working class has taken in the country as a whole has happened in Liverpool as well. So to say there's a Liverpool exceptionalism is a backwards thing because it doesn't prepare the working class to move from the position that it's in.<sup>337</sup>

To this end, the mobilisation of a Liverpool exceptionalism was considered to be ultimately debilitating to anti-austerity politics. For Trotskyists, romanticising Liverpudlian political identities obviates the necessity to rebuild the institutions, networks, values and identities that reproduce working-class struggle and that have been eroded under neoliberalism. These organisational structures are what previously enabled activists to "transform personal emotions, such as anger and hopelessness, into a collectively defined sense of injustice" (Brown and Pickerill, 2009: 27). The invocation of Liverpool exceptionalism therefore restricts participants from seeing the significance of the wider class struggle, and neglects the need to engage in what Militants understood as the slow, patient movement-building. Yet paradoxically, for other activists, it was precisely the behaviour of the 'old' left that resulted in Liverpool being a disabling place to conduct anti-austerity politics (Chapter 6). These perspectives allow us to contest the queue of prominent voices – such as Jeremy Corbyn and the political commentator, Owen Jones – which extol the radical nature of the city,<sup>338</sup> for those actually involved in struggle, at times, Liverpool was an unproductive place to conduct anti-austerity politics.

On reflection, anti-austerity politics in Liverpool clearly reworked the political imaginary and brought some new actors and discourses into the broader assemblage of existing left politics in the city. These practices also politicised, in embracing or rejecting, particular spatial imaginaries of Liverpool in order to shape the claims that they made, to the extent that new solidarities and antagonisms formed. The cross-cutting of austerity politics across a range of diverse groups in the city thus allowed the formation of new alliances between trade unionists, socialists and anti-cuts campaigners, acting in solidarity with service user groups (such as Save our Sanity), mental health activists and autonomous community activists.<sup>339</sup> In addition, anti-austerity politics provided the catalyst for the creation of new anti-austerity identities and

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<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>337</sup> Martin Ralph, *OSAC and the International Socialist League*, interview.

<sup>338</sup> Jeremy Corbyn visits Liverpool, field notes (02/08/16), *Liverpool Echo* (2015); Owen Jones' book launch, field notes (24/03/15).

<sup>339</sup> The autonomous welfare advice surgery *Reclaim* was one such example of attempting to politicise the major victims of austerity (such as those suffering the bedroom tax, workfare and sanctions) into developing anti-austerity identities.

political formations. That said, these new alliances were severely limited in their ability to act in strategically effective ways and mobilise new actors because contention remained largely restricted to pre-existing political networks. As a result, such alliances were geographically confined within certain areas of the city.<sup>340</sup> This meant that very little resistance occurred in the northern parts of Liverpool, despite the potential of the assemblage's overt workerist tones and the fact that these areas are both the most deprived and greatest sufferers of austerity measures (Meegan *et al.*, 2014).

Moving forward, Liverpool remains characterised by a grassroots activism that continues to be defined by a unique attachment to place and which draws upon the long histories and networks within the city to open up fruitful avenues for resistance. Yet, while this oppositional political identity may persist and evolve to create a new anti-austerity imaginary, clear limits to building solidarity remain. Noticeable, therefore, is the lack of any productive alliance between the avowedly anti-austerity assemblage and those groups or organisations which operate through more prefigurative logics such as the Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust (CLT), Homebaked and Alt Valley Community Trust,<sup>341</sup> which each stresses its 'power to' effect progressive change and to exploit the 'cracks' that open up within austerity urbanism (Thompson, 2015). Admittedly, other developments are promising; overlaps between the Blacklist Support Group, the Liverpool FC grassroots supporters' union, *Spirit of Shankly*, and the Hillsborough Justice Campaign has encouraged certain solidarities to converge, such as around pressuring Liverpool FC both to reduce ticket prices *and* to terminate its contract with construction firm *Carillion*,<sup>342</sup> in ways which reaffirm the productive nature of left politics and networks in the city (see *Figure 7.8*). Nonetheless, during the research period, anti-austerity was not a node around which disparate struggles could unite effectively, despite the sharing of a common collective identity, and anti-fascism was better placed to ensure a temporary coming together of these movements. In time, it remains to be seen whether, perhaps under the emerging force of Momentum, these ever-shifting maps of grievance can forge more significant openings in the cracks of the present conjuncture.

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<sup>340</sup> Field notes (various). The most geographically concentrated forms of resistance were in the south of Liverpool, and in the central ward of Old Swan.

<sup>341</sup> Homebaked is located in Anfield, Liverpool and is a community run, cooperative bakery that provides training and job opportunities for local people, and operates as a CLT, through which it aims to provide affordable housing, field notes (13/02/16); Alt Valley Community Trust is a community anchor organisation and social enterprise which has assumed control of some municipal services (Chapter 5). For the Granby Four Streets CLT, see Thompson (2015).

<sup>342</sup> Field notes (22/01/16).



**Figure 7.8:** Protest against Carillion at Anfield Stadium, 17 January 2016 (Source: *Liverpool Echo*, 2016e).

## 7.6 Conclusions

This chapter has enriched the more-than-cuts framework by examining the actually existing forms of anti-austerity contestation. This has been achieved by engaging with the different geographies of the assemblage. In reviewing existent geographical literature on the spatialities of contentious politics, the chapter argued for situating place-based struggles within their respective geographical contexts. Through so doing, it was revealed that a relational understanding shows how these struggles are not merely defensive, but instead constitutive of new political identities and solidarities which are produced at the intersection of different trajectories of resistance, both past and present. Indeed, this framework has led to the attainment of several novel insights into anti-austerity politics in Liverpool. First, we learnt that participants rely upon particular spatial imaginaries in order to make sense of, and help shape, their own political identities. Secondly, the assemblage is enacted through locally embedded knowledges, practices and networks through which resistance is informed, inspired and sustained. Thirdly, anti-austerity politics provides a vehicle through which the past is (re)interpreted, new stories are told, new meanings of place are articulated, and new maps of grievance are produced. This chapter has, therefore, promulgated a series of major theoretical contributions. Most importantly, it reaffirms that anti-austerity cannot be contained within a single analytical framework. Rather, a more nuanced and situated analysis highlights the significance of place to anti-austerity struggle, and illuminates existing understanding to show

how conflict over the meaning of place is entangled with contestation over cuts. The focus on the affective dimension of political participation also provides insight into how the micropolitics of movement activity must be understood as a significant determinant of mobilisation, in turn shifting conceptualisations of contentious politics beyond the limited, goal-orientated measures still found within the literature. Finally, anti-austerity struggles open up new possibilities for political identities and solidarities which extend beyond the immediate temporal and spatial scales in question. This analysis further contributes to the more-than-cuts framework; these different theoretical framings are brought together in Chapter 8.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Conclusion**

#### **8.1 Thesis Summary**

This thesis has provided insight into the politics of anti-austerity in Liverpool. Through a research methodology characterised as being politically engaged, the research has examined how individuals, groups and organisations who oppose cuts actually make sense of the politics of austerity and anti-austerity. Further, the thesis has considered whether political alternatives to austerity are emerging in the city, and what their potentialities and limits are. The applied more-than-cuts framework has revealed that anti-austerity politics transcend a reactive or defensive resistance of cuts, and are instead constitutive of the articulation of wider political imaginaries. This key finding has been enriched by deploying a spatial reading of the relationship between the practices of anti-austerity and place, which has shown how the performance of contestation is inextricably tied to place-based Liverpoolian political identities. Hence, a deeper reading of the organic evolution of anti-austerity resistance has demonstrated how a crisis that was initially sparked by mortgage defaults in the US has resulted, a decade later, in the fundamental reshaping of, and contestation over, what a Liverpoolian political identity is. In this final chapter, section 8.2 discusses the major theoretical contributions made by the thesis, and draws together the three conceptual sub-frames into an elaborate whole. Section 8.3 draws upon some empirical reflections on the future of radical left politics in Liverpool and beyond. Finally, section 8.4 concludes the thesis by suggesting potential avenues for future research.

#### **8.2 Conceptual Contributions**

The first conceptual sub-frame, introduced in Chapter 5, critiqued structuralist interpretations of the ways in which austerity is experienced in the locale, and is managed by the local authority. The dominant conceptual framework for analysing how austerity operates within a place, austerity urbanism portrays municipal governments as being passive victims in the implementation of austerity measures, and committed to economic growth at any cost. Interrogating the example of Liverpool City Council (LCC), however, promotes a more nuanced picture. LCC did display tendencies of austerian realism – a result of operating within the broader context of statutory constraints as well as the lack of political alternatives existing at the national scale – and was shown to deploy techno-managerialist strategies which stifled dissent and reaffirmed a politics of no alternative within the local authority. Nonetheless, through a poststructuralist approach, the research revealed that austerity urbanism is a highly situated process, which relies upon a range of local institutional and non-institutional actors

consciously reproducing austerity logics within place-frames in order to craft legitimacy at the municipal scale. Reinterpreting austerity urbanism through a geographical lens showed that there was an active (re-)politicisation of austerity in Liverpool, where the Labour council has adopted a rhetorically antagonistic/strategically cooperative relationship with successive Conservative-led central governments. The findings also illustrate how austerity was being embraced by the municipal left as a transformative catalyst for social change, in ways which contradict this rhetoric. To this end, local authorities do not impose austerity measures uncontested, but are strategic actors in the negotiation of local forms of austerity urbanism.

The thesis earlier acknowledged calls to consider variegated austerity (Meegan *et al.*, 2014), but the research suggests that such theorisations are insufficient to encapsulate the diverse ways that austerity is politicised through place-making, where certain place-based political identities are mobilised to legitimate municipal fiscal retrenchment. Specifically, this involved invoking a vision of Liverpool's historic entrepreneurial spirit as part of an aggressive strategy to help build new relational political identities *vis-à-vis* national and international politics. In addition to techno-managerialism, these claims to place are integral to cultivating consensus at the local level. Finally, viewing local authorities as strategic actors allows a closer reading of those actually existing political alternatives which are being enacted at the municipal scale. Liverpool City Council's (LCC) 'Invest to Earn' is therefore part of an austerity-inspired, advanced urban entrepreneurialism, but this is accompanied by more nuanced strategies to pursue social justice within a competitive neoliberal environment. While LCC has not countenanced setting an illegal budget like in the mid-1980s, this does not affirm a politics of submission, as may be perceived by grassroots actors. As one Labour councillor has argued, invoking Gramsci, "the 'old is dying' while the 'new is yet to be born'" (Munby, 2015: 37); there is potential for creating alternatives to austerity, and perhaps a new urban settlement is on the horizon, albeit still with severe constraints. The novel value of this conceptual sub-frame is therefore to show how situated analyses of austerity urbanism are clearly productive for de-emphasising the all-encompassing logics of neoliberalism, and for determining possibilities and limits for local authorities to enact progressive direction within the current conjuncture.

Chapter 6 discussed how much the theorising of anti-austerity resistance has utilised the framework of post-politics, and has emphasised the foreclosure of anti-austerity politics at a variety of scales. However, it was argued that this perspective lacks proper engagement with those actually existing forms of contestation that have emerged and that, as a result, scholars have denied the agency of grassroots political activity, leading to analyses which are politically prescriptive and disempowering. In turn, resistance is posed as reactive, localised, defensive and/or unproductive. The second conceptual reading therefore responded to calls for more

sympathetic interpretations of bottom-up political activity which engage with anti-austerity contestation on their own terms. Through this, it was shown how anti-austerity politics operates as an assemblage, where, rather than characterised as a ‘movement’, anti-austerity is better theorised as a nodal point of interaction around which different place-based formations in the city converge, act and then dissipate. These formations critique austerity and propose alternatives which reflect particular Liverpoolian-based place frames. The research highlighted how the grounds of opposition stretched beyond cuts and across a variety of geographical scales, ranging from responsabilising LCC to identifying broader processes of neoliberalism as simultaneously accountable. Thus, the more-than-cuts framework demonstrates the productivity of anti-austerity politics in repoliticising the crisis – where grassroots actors are not passive victims – and reshaping the local political landscape. Strategically, the assemblage did fail to build productive alliances with LCC and other institutional actors, and electoralism was largely unsuccessful. There was also little space for the flourishing of solidarity initiatives and autonomous practices, as earlier witnessed in Argentina (North and Huber, 2004) and, in the recent crisis, Greece (Arampatzi, 2017a). Nevertheless, despite these structural and strategic dysfunctions, a closer reading reveals more nuance than post-political interpretations allow. Indeed, the mere act of situating unequal power relations within the terrain of contestation is itself a productive outcome of political activity, and demonstrates the capacity to reconfigure local political and spatial imaginaries. Yet, while this second sub-frame is clearly productive for emphasising the agency of anti-austerity politics locally, it also demands a closer consideration of the spatialities of resistance, with a particular focus on political identity formation, in order to conceptualise precisely how and why political contestation is geographically diverse.

The third sub-frame enriched the more-than-cuts framework by engaging with the different geographies of the assemblage. Through this, it was apparent that anti-austerity politics is constitutive of new political identities and solidarities which are produced at the intersection of different trajectories of resistance, both past and present. The findings showed that the intergenerational transmission of politics through Liverpoolian families was a crucial factor in the definition and development of participants’ political identities in their formative years. In turn, participants relied upon these spatial imaginaries in order to make sense of, and help shape, their own political identities and, consequently, how they relate to austerity. For example, one participant attributed her strong sense of social justice to her Irish-Catholic roots, indicating how these political identities are relationally interconnected to other struggles and places across different scales. The sub-frame showed how anti-austerity politics is practiced through these identities; beyond protesting against cuts, participation involves reaffirming place-based Liverpoolian political identities, which are then used to sustain activism even



when individuals realise that their original demands will not be met. In another example, one participant was excluded from anti-fascist activity due to their support for Trotskyist Militant in the 1980s. This shows how contemporary anti-austerity politics are also shaped by temporally extensive processes. Engaging with the geographies of anti-austerity resistance revealed how grassroots groups contested the entrepreneurial identity proposed by LCC, and sought to actively redefine what a Liverpoolian political identity is, or should be. This was accompanied by competing attempts at place-making which implored the council to reconsider what Liverpool, as a city, 'stands for'. This sub-frame demonstrates how anti-austerity politics must be firmly situated within place in order to observe how these practices are constitutive of drawing new maps of grievance and reshaping place-based political identities.

In bringing these three conceptual sub-frames together, a bottom-up engagement with the spatialities and micropolitics of actually existing forms of anti-austerity contestation, informed by poststructuralism, shows how such struggles offer new possibilities for political identities and solidarities which transcend austerity and the immediate temporal and spatial scales in question. While the post-crisis corpus of literature has echoed the voices of many political commentators in observing that the crisis has been mobilised much more effectively by the political right than the left, this literature fails to account for the diverse ways that the crisis has been mobilised by competing groups. This is, hitherto, a significant theoretical oversight which this thesis has addressed. Furthermore, while emerging work has called for a place-based approach to austerity (Fuller and West, 2017; Meegan *et al.*, 2014), this has not yet entailed an emphasis on grassroots political activity, and has remained focused at an institutional level. This thesis has combined the study of both institutional and grassroots actors, in order to conceptualise how the politics of austerity and anti-austerity play out at the local level, and to examine what conflict exists between these different agents. A geographical focus is not, therefore, merely an academic exercise, but helps to explain what forms of political alternatives are emerging, how and why, and their potentialities and limits. The final conceptual contribution is that, in contrast to structuralist accounts which lead to politically disempowering analyses and deny agency to oppositional forces, this research shows how anti-austerity contestation can be generative of new political possibilities, even when the original demands may not be reached. Through developing a triad of sub-frames which piece together holistically – as more-than-cuts – this thesis encourages social movement scholars not to draw out conclusions *a priori*, or to epistemologically privilege one particular theoretical framework, but to reason with how anti-austerity politics are actually practiced through a politically-engaged, situated, bottom-up approach.

The thesis also began from a researcher standpoint that was politically-engaged and critically committed to local anti-austerity politics and the search for political alternatives to austerity at

a number of scales. Allied to this novel conceptual approach, this research involved engaging with the ‘messy’ realities of social movement politics over the long term as part of an extended commitment to that movement. The research also occurred out of a personal interest in the principles of politically-engaged research, and an obligation to examine its methodological possibilities and limits. Three conceptual innovations occurred. First, under long-term political engagement, my positionality shifted in ways which offered particular benefits and challenges to conducting the research. Secondly, methodological literature on undertaking activist research – from the capital A activist perspective – underplays the extent to which ethnography is a complicated, affective and embodied experience, which places certain pressures and limits on the types of political commitment the researcher can feasibly make. Thirdly, while activist ethnographic methods have been typically conducted within relatively coherent, stable, and ideologically-homogeneous groups, researching anti-austerity politics as an assemblage placed constraints on my ability to simultaneously gain access, build trust, rapport and solidarity, and make an appropriate contribution to the politics of the milieu. These methodological dilemmas, and the ways in which they were overcome, make a theoretical contribution to how scholar-activists should determine their approach in advance of future political engagements. Moreover, these suggestions should not be read in isolation to the more-than-cuts framework; rather, understanding the micropractices of political activity necessarily entails a bottom-up approach to examining it. However, while these theoretical innovations remain important to the thesis as a whole, I wish to conclude by drawing upon some empirical reflections on what these developments mean for ongoing struggles for social justice within both the Liverpool and broader UK contexts.

### **8.3 Empirical Reflections: An Afterword**

When, in September 2015, Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader of the Labour Party, many considered this to represent the possibility of finally reshaping the political terrain (Massey, 2015; Seymour, 2016). Yet, concurrently, in Liverpool, Corbyn’s victory occurred parallel to the disintegration of Liverpool against the Cuts (LATC), owing to the fall-out associated with accusations of fascist involvement, and the general burn-out of an assemblage that had made few notable gains since its emergence in 2010. The fresh impetus of Momentum also signalled the death knell for many neighbourhood groups, whose individuals turned to Momentum as the most credible organisation for practicing anti-austerity politics at a variety of scales. Some members of the formal political parties, such as Left Unity, also re-joined Labour, while others were keen to work alongside Momentum rather than seeking to rebuild LATC. It can therefore be concluded that, at the time of disengagement in early 2016, the forms of grassroots political activity studied had effectively been hollowed out; perhaps, even, after the 21 months of study, it could be said that LCC had successfully fended off opposition, and that austerity-inspired

urban entrepreneurialism had been solidified at the municipal scale. The year of 2016 saw the steady crafting of the nascent Momentum movement in Liverpool, culminating in the four-day fringe festival, *The World Transformed 2016* (TWT), which ran shadow to the Labour Party Annual Conference taking place in Liverpool. In attendance at TWT were many local anti-austerity activists, who described feeling excited that, under Corbyn's leadership, things could finally change. Interestingly, the festival also attracted hundreds of people from across the UK, many of whom told how the radical nature of Liverpool served as inspiration for the conduct of contentious politics. The thesis has drawn out that, instead, for some, Liverpool was a profoundly debilitating place to practice anti-austerity politics, owing precisely to those legacies of past struggle. Indeed, it remains to be seen whether Liverpool will again provide the laboratory for practicing radical politics, and whether Momentum will be the vehicle through which these ends are achieved. For now, at least, the case against austerity-inspired urban entrepreneurialism seems closed, even with Corbyn having reignited the movement. TWT, however, also emphasised that, for many, Liverpool continues to be heralded as a place capable of facilitating such endeavours.

On reflection, it could be said that the period of research may come to represent a relatively dormant period for radical politics in the city, particularly when contrasted to the visible mobilisations of the mid-1980s, under cuts of a lesser extent. Unlike in Detroit, the city is working, and it is difficult to defend pessimistic discourses in light of Liverpool's recent economic revival. Grassroots groups failed to propose, or enact, credible alternatives to austerity-inspired urban entrepreneurialism, and did not build the necessary alliances to contest LCC discourse adequately. Nevertheless, even when protest movements fail to deliver their original demands, they can leave behind residues for new struggles, and continue to strengthen and reshape existing networks. Thus, despite not achieving dominance within public political discourse in the preceding years, the constant articulation of a politics of anti-austerity was integral to propelling Jeremy Corbyn to the position of Labour Party leadership, which has consequently reshaped the political landscape. In contrast to gloomy post-political interpretations, these political practices were therefore clearly productive even within a period of assumed relative dormancy. At the outset, the research asked whether anti-austerity would have the capacity to initiate progressive change: to this extent, the answer is yes; there is now transformative political potential at the national scale. Returning to the analysis in Chapter 6, the question remains how, although Momentum has welcomed an observably younger and more diverse, albeit politically inexperienced, demographic into the city's radical political milieu, this group will cooperate with those "older Bennite and Militant-style leftovers [who] are, in general, too ideologically formed and politically inflexible" to help rebuild a new left (Seymour, 2016: 95).

Finally, in an era of resurgent nationalism and right-wing populism – as characterised by the June 2016 Brexit vote – it remains to be seen whether the left can begin to articulate more progressive localisms under which particular place-based imaginaries might advocate more inclusive and socially just notions of belonging, rather than the current politics of nostalgia and exclusion brought about as a response to austerity conditions. Such outward-looking articulations of Liverpool exceptionalism were raised in Chapter 7, although it is too early to say whether Momentum in Liverpool will attempt to consolidate these broader political imaginaries and redefine what it is that the city stand for. Given the Conservative Government's abandonment of the austerity discourse by summer 2016, the degree to which the new welfare settlement has now become normalised, and the fact that Brexit has replaced austerity at the level of national political discourse, a number of opportunities and challenges endure. While the benefits (or costs) of recent regional devolution to the Liverpool City Region are yet to be realised, local political activity at both the institutional and grassroots scales may consider radical potential in renewed attempts at place-making. This could be combined with an emphasis on alliance-building, under which Momentum might review the lessons of the anti-austerity experience in terms of dealing more strategically with LCC, as well as seeking to mobilise the 5,000 people who amassed to welcome Jeremy Corbyn to the city in August 2016.

#### **8.4 Avenues for Future Research**

In contrast to traditional case study research, the aim of this thesis has not been to extract broader lessons or trends. It has, instead, shown how a number of spatially extensive political and economic processes operate within the locale, yet, simultaneously, invoke a range of temporal and spatial scales in the enactment, mediation and contestation of austerity. The thesis promotes the lens of place as a key spatial framework to deconstruct those processes. In turn, the first proposed avenue for future study concerns the interrogation of spatially situated practices of anti-austerity resistance within and across geographical contexts, where research can shed further light upon the specificities which ensure that radical alternatives to neoliberalism have emerged in some places and not others. In doing so, an emergent body of literature will be able to draw out the spatially differentiated possibilities and limitations for radical left politics in ways which transcend structuralist thinking. Work studying the flows of capital, scales of fiscal disciplining and depoliticisation strategies of elites remains eminently necessary, but must be allied to a consideration of how these processes are always contingent and contextual, and constantly being disrupted at a variety of scales. Work by Knight (2013) and Arampatzi (2017a, 2017b) has been productive in examining Greece in this regard, and North and Huber (2004) earlier captured Argentina, but further research must begin to consider a wider range of geographical and historical contexts.

Although austerity no longer dominates the political agenda, the Labour Party remains under socialist, anti-austerity leadership, and Jeremy Corbyn has the backing of Momentum, a grassroots movement comprising over 23,000 members and 200,000 registered supporters (Momentum, 2017). Attention must therefore be paid to the ways in which the crisis is being re-politicised in the UK context, particularly given the surge in Labour support in those northern regions which had only recently, in the 2015 General Election, witnessed an upswing towards UKIP. In the years to come, Brexit and regional devolution are likely to dominate the political agenda for northern cities, while the Conservative Party also attempts to solidify its grip on the English political landscape through the 'Northern Powerhouse'. Moving beyond consideration of Labour's electoral prospects, the pressing concern is how to fashion a new hegemonic strategy on the left that has the capacity to unite a variety of diverse actors across a range of spatial scales. Momentum's nascent focus on community politics, such as volunteering at food banks, and the mobilisation of WhatsApp, phone banks, and other new technologies, therefore provides many fruitful avenues for exploring how a new common sense may be constructed.

Returning to Liverpool, locating the rise of Momentum within the city's wider political history offers further scope for analysis. Given the finding that Liverpool proved to be an ultimately debilitating place to conduct radical politics, the city provides an interesting test case as to whether the 'old' left can effectively be united with newer, younger activists, who must begin to experiment with alternative forms of politics or else risk the same dangers of LATC. The direction and structures of a national organisation will help, but the results of this thesis compel Merseyside Momentum to consider building more generative alliances with LCC and sympathetic institutional and non-institutional actors, including policy-makers. Finally, it is proposed that charting the development of Momentum would address some of the methodological difficulties of conducting politically-engaged research on contemporary radical politics in Liverpool, given that Momentum is a relatively well-defined, stable and coherent, member-based organisation. This would carve open political space for valuable academic contributions to the task at hand, and offer further possibilities for scholar-activists to facilitate more socially just futures; an ever-present, but increasing imperative, given the current political moment.

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## APPENDIX A: MOVEMENT PEN PORTRAITS

Appendix A provides brief pen portraits of some of the organisations involved in opposing austerity in Liverpool during the research period. This appendix does not provide a systematic analysis of each group, but is intended to provide short background information in order to orientate the reader. The pen portraits explain: what the organisation is; when, how and why it was formed; and how it links to the wider anti-austerity assemblage in Liverpool; how it functioned at the end of the research period. Further information, such as who was involved, and how the movement functioned, is omitted to ensure anonymity.



### Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition

The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) was formed in 2010. It is a socialist electoral alliance that first contended the 2010 UK General Election, although it has roots in the Socialist Alliance, which ran from 1992-2005 in England. TUSC emerged out of the No2EU left-wing Eurosceptic grouping which competed in the 2009 and 2014 elections for the European Parliament, and was headed by the radical National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT), the Communist Party of Britain and the Socialist Party. TUSC was founded as a working-class alternative to New Labour. The Socialist Workers Party joined later, but withdrew in 2017, although remained active in the autonomous TUSC in Scotland. TUSC's key pledges include: ending austerity; a £10 an hour minimum wage; a mass council house building programme; scrapping tuition fees; and democratic public ownership of the NHS, railways, and public services. In the 2015 UK General Election, TUSC performed poorly, receiving only 0.1 per cent of the popular vote. The coalition did not contest the 2017 General Election, instead calling for a Labour victory.

### Left Unity

Left Unity is a left-wing political party in the UK, which was founded in 2013. The party formed in 2013 in response to the cross-party consensus for austerity, and was partly inspired by the rise of left-wing parties in Greece and Spain. Its most prominent member is film director Ken Loach, who appealed for a new party to replace Labour due to its acceptance of austerity, and shift towards neoliberalism. The party is socialist, anti-capitalist, and advocates environmentalism, feminism and anti-racism. In 2014, it had 2,000 members, although this has declined since the election of Jeremy Corbyn to leader of the Labour Party in September 2015. Left Unity has been involved in both local and national anti-austerity protests. Its National Secretary is Felicity Dowling, former Militant and Liverpool District Labour Party Secretary in the 1980s. The party contested ten seats in the 2015 General Election; only two won more than 1 per cent of the vote.



### Liverpool against the Cuts

Liverpool against the Cuts (LATC) formed in 2010 with the support of Unite the Union. Members recalled attending anti-cuts demonstrations in London, but soon recognised that collective action

needed to take place locally too, and from these discussions emerged LATC. The organisation initially involved a broad range of socialists, trade unionists, anarchists and anti-cuts campaigners. As the years passed, the anarchist influence waned. During the research period, LATC met monthly and typically attracted 30-40 supporters. It acted as an umbrella organisation for the various community organisations active in the city, and allowed coordination between autonomous groups and the formal political parties. Most anti-austerity groups participated in LATC, usually at least sending delegates. Towards the end of the research, LATC fell apart due to movement burn-out and a fall out over fascist involvement in some neighbourhood groups. It remains active, but with a smaller number of members.

#### Merseyside People's Assembly Against Austerity

The People's Assembly Against Austerity is a national political initiative which began in 2013, launched via an open letter published in the *Guardian*. Its signatories – which included socialist heavyweight Tony Benn, General Secretary of Unite the Union Len McCluskey, and Jeremy Corbyn – called for a broad-based movement to unite those whose voices are unheard in British politics, and to campaign against austerity measures. It has been backed by the major trade unions, as well as the Green Party, Left Unity, and some left Labour MPs. Merseyside People's Assembly was formed in June 2013, and a public meeting in Liverpool that September attracted over 500 supporters. Yet, despite organising some early episodes of direct action, the organisation failed to take off locally. A revival of sorts was attempted in 2015, with leaflets appearing on demonstrations, but no further action occurred.

#### Old Swan against the Cuts

Old Swan against the Cuts (OSAC) is a neighbourhood group-cum-political party active in the Old Swan ward in Liverpool. The organisation began in 2013 when some individuals began to protest outside Old Swan Library, and an anti-cuts



groups soon emerged. After some time, the group found a base in the nearby youth club, and met fortnightly to discuss actions. OSAC was central to the public campaign to save libraries, and played a central role in both LATC and the No Austerity Conference. In 2015, the group contested the local elections in Liverpool. Around this time, the group formed an alliance with Left Unity members in Stockport. OSAC has also protested against welfare sanctions, as well as extending its struggle to include fighting for mobility rights. At the end of the research period it was still an actively functioning neighbourhood group.

#### Sefton Park Anti-Cuts

Sefton Park Anti-Cuts grew out of the *Sefton Park Save the Libraries* campaign. The campaign to save the libraries began in late 2014, when an initial meeting to discuss how Sefton Park Library could be saved – following threats of closure – attracted around one hundred people. A core of those remained, who led the campaign locally, but who were also keen to stress the importance of fighting for the future of *all* of Liverpool's libraries. At the No Austerity Conference in February 2015, members decided to become an explicitly anti-cuts group, in recognition of the campaigning they were involved in, and began to coordinate with South Liverpool Against Poverty (SLAP), another anti-cuts group active in south Liverpool. Members of Sefton Park Anti-Cuts were also active in LATC.



### Love Activists

The Love Activists were an anarchist-inspired group of activists who rose to prominence as a result of their initial occupation of the disused former Bank of England Building on Castle Street, Liverpool in April 2015. The group was an offshoot of the national Love Activist group, which occupied an empty bank in London the previous year. The Merseyside group occupied the building for around three weeks, before being evicted by police. During this time, the group – the core formed around 20 people – provided food and shelter to a number of homeless people in the city, as well as led a public campaign against homelessness and austerity measures, culminating with forwarding a series of demands to the city's mayor, Joe Anderson, which included that he meet with the Love Activists, and that Liverpool City Council must commit to not imposing the cuts. Following their eviction, the group protested at Pier Head, and occupied MelloMello, a disused bar and performance space in the city centre. The Love Activists acted autonomously, and did not tend to coordinate with other anti-austerity groups in Liverpool.



### Save our Sanity

Save our Sanity was formed following Liverpool City Council's proposal to close or outsource mental health day-service provision in the city in early 2014. A meeting was called, and representatives from the Social Work Action Network (SWAN), LATC and Unite the Union were present, alongside service users and council workers. The name 'Save our Sanity' was chosen by service users, who supported a one-day strike by the council workers. Other actions included distributing flyers, a petition, speaking on the regional radio station, and contacting councillors and MPs. Save our Sanity sent delegates to LATC, and coordinated loosely with anti-austerity activities in the city.



### Unite CASA 567 Community Branch

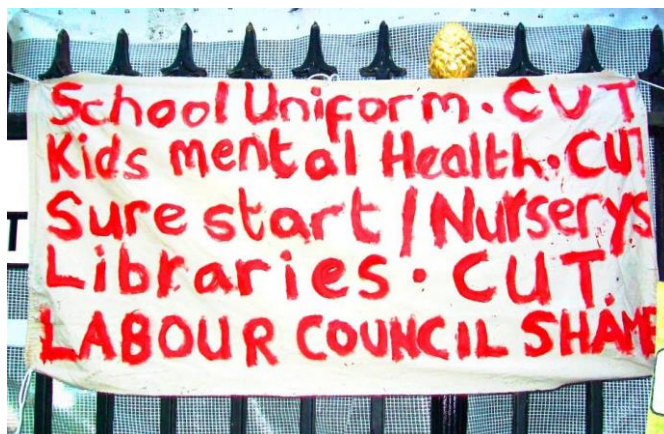
Unite CASA 567 is a 'community branch' of Unite the Union, and is the fastest growing community branch in the UK. It launched in 2012, and meets monthly in the Casa, which is a hub for left politics in the city. It has around 600 members, and is made up of socialists, trade unionists, welfare rights advisors and community activists. The branch liaises with both community groups and Liverpool City Council, and fights to protect the interests of its members and the communities in which they reside. Unite CASA 567 is heavily involved with Keep our NHS Public Merseyside, and has participated in a range of protests against welfare reforms.

### Reclaim

Reclaim was an autonomous benefits surgery which operated weekly in the predominantly working-class district of Kirkdale, north Liverpool. The surgery was led by local volunteers and initially emerged out of struggles against the 'bedroom tax', before becoming a wider campaign group against all austerity measures. By April 2013, the surgery had assisted over 270 people and also provided a range of welfare support, such as providing an informal food bank service. In addition, the surgery acted as a community discussion forum where people came to discuss their problems, receive advice, and tackle their isolation. During the period of the research, Reclaim split, and some members turned to participating in the Love Activists.

### Momentum Merseyside

Momentum is a national grassroots campaigning network with over 150 local groups, 23,000 members and 200,000 supporters. It evolved in 2015 out of Jeremy Corbyn's successful campaign for leadership of the Labour Party, and aims to support the Labour Party under Corbyn's leadership and to enable it to win elections, whilst also campaigning for change outside of party politics. Momentum is active in Merseyside, and had attracted some Left Unity members and LATC activists by early 2016, leading to the decline of those organisations. Momentum Merseyside was in a nascent form during the research process, but was constituted of a range of socialists, trade unionists, and a number of younger people who previously had not participated in anti-cuts activities.



# No Austerity

**Report from the  
No Austerity Conference  
14 February 2015  
Friends Meeting House,  
Liverpool**

## EDITORS

Josh Blamire  
Juliet Edgar  
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## DESIGN

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www.facebook.com/  
events/752549218198764/



twitter.com/noausterityliv



Watch Online  
bambuser.com/v/5285137

# No Cuts, No Austerity

Our streets, Our services

Liverpool Against the Cuts invited everyone who wanted to fight the Con-Dem austerity policies and Labour's austerity plans, to join the "No Austerity" conference 14 February 2015 at the Friends Meeting House, School Lane, Liverpool.

The conference was initially a development of the community campaigns to save the 11 libraries in Liverpool that the City Council planned to close. It was a victorious campaign in that the libraries remain open, but there is a recognition that the future remains insecure whilst austerity blights our lives.

How did we succeed in the libraries struggle? It was important to respect the autonomy of the community campaigns and union struggles, this made it possible to work together to build a leadership and to make agreed joint actions.

The aim of the "No Austerity" conference was to bring activists and campaigning groups together and build on the existing struggles that are taking place in our communities, on the streets, and in our work places.

It was keenly attended by many aspects of this diverse movement, including: anti-bedroom tax campaigners; housing rights and welfare activists; disabled peoples' activists; trade unionists; students; representatives from leftist political parties and even those new to politics but equally conscious of the devastating effects of austerity policies.

We wanted to learn from each others' strategy and tactics and to develop a common programme on which we can fight in our campaigns and the elections, to end austerity that is destroying our communities and neighbourhoods and worsening all our lives.

In order to defeat austerity we need to build a mass opposition movement. To achieve this we need to raise awareness of existing struggles and raise the consciousness of what is possible.

This pamphlet cannot reflect the level of contributions made on the day but aims to reflect the diversity and number of campaigns and activists represented, and the feelings of hope and commitment that the day produced.

Reports from campaigns, practical workshops and open discussion all fed



into a common programme that was developed on the day (see pages 6 & 7).

A number of actions were agreed on the day - the programme of struggle for campaigns and the elections; "No Austerity" demo 25 April (see page 12); to publish the programme and a conference pamphlet; to support all candidates standing in the elections against the austerity parties, including the Labour Party, and who agree with the agreed programme; and finally to explore the possibility of organising another conference.

A number of anti-austerity political parties were present in an individual capacity. So, community groups, unions and political parties worked together.

Messages of solidarity were received from across the UK and Internationally, from many who would have liked to attend but were unable to, these can be found on pages 4, 10 and 11. The messages reflect that we are fighting against a nationally and globally organised attack on the world's working class. This illustrates clearly that whilst we fight in our campaigns locally, to defeat austerity we must be linked in struggle nationally and internationally.

Please write if you would like more information or if you would like to join us to help towards building a mass No Austerity movement with rank and file democracy. All welcome if you agree with the programme and the democratic grass roots way in which it was developed from the bottom up.

Ed's

## Thank You

Thank you to the union and community organisations who helped build this conference and make it happen - FBU Merseyside, UCU Liverpool university, UCU John Moores university, UCU Liverpool City College, Unite branches: Merseyside Finance NW11, NW 106 RLBHUT, NW 522.

We have to say thank you for the food - an amazing feast from Reclaim and their team of supporters from across Merseyside. Everyone expressed their genuine thanks for the enormous amount of fantastic work - keeping us satisfied and helping to making it a great day.

We sing the praises of and thank the musicians, in particular Phil Newton, for their renderings of Joe Hill, Bella Ciao and many other lively inspiring protest tunes.

The next step is 25 April 'March for No Austerity'. All are welcome - let's make a noise against austerity.



# Workshops: Building the Struggle

In the build-up to the conference, it was felt that we had to organise more participatory and engaging ways of producing a shared politics together. It was widely agreed that organising three ‘themed’ workshops would allow us to share our thoughts and experiences in more democratic and

organic ways. Overall, the workshops were a great success and also suggest new ways in which we can begin to develop alternative political strategies. Below, each of the workshop facilitators gives an account of what we learnt from each other, and how we could move forward.



## Workshop 1: Our experiences

This workshop sought to collect activists – working in diverse campaigns – and share their experiences of struggling against austerity. The general outcome was that mass mobilisations are needed in every campaign – but how do we achieve this? We need to spread the message that we won’t stand for these cuts. This can be achieved through social media, leaflet drops and attending regular meetings. We need to learn from each other and draw on others who have suffered austerity measures.

People discussed the growing importance of social media campaigns, like 38 Degrees, but also using Facebook and Twitter to support each other and better communicate what kinds of resistance are taking place. We also discussed the role of the media in campaigns, and how it can be harnessed in positive ways, but also the difficulties of receiving adequate and just coverage. We saw people use YouTube in the case of the library campaign, which was widely agreed to be the most notable (and successful!) campaign.

It was agreed that the success was down to us all having the determination and resolve – and, most importantly, working together – that forced the council to ‘save’ the 11 ‘at risk’ community libraries. We should take heart from our efforts, but there’s a lot to do.

Kellie Butchard  
*Library Campaigner and standing for  
the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC)*

## Workshop 2: How do we work together

There were people from a wide variety of groups such as anti cuts, anti-fracking, political parties, pensioners.

How do we approach other groups when needed? This was one of the first questions. Also, how to recognise when your particular group is in need of help or is becoming isolated and so losing focus and effectiveness.

An example is the SOS Campaign to save Liverpool Mental Health Service and Adult Social Care. They wanted wider help and came to Liverpool Against the Cuts for support. So whilst they built their own campaigns they have received practical help and suggestions. Sometimes this can be as basic as a room full of people saying well done you are on the right track. They also bonded the workers and the service users which was vital and brought a real spine of solidarity to the campaign. So each can look at what others want, and ensure that the needs of both are met in the group.

Keep Our NHS Public (KONP) said we need the “Spirit of 45” – where people help each other. When the NHS was formed this was needed, now we need a strong community spirit to save it. Patients working with unions is an example. Importantly this pushes the sense that we belong to a society – something the Tories and neo-liberalism resent.

Joe from anti-fracking talked of the different levels campaigners come up against. For example anti-cuts groups faced opposition from the council and local police – anti frackers have faced the wrath of the state and state broadcasting who misrepresent their aims and motivations. It was pointed out how groups such as pensioner groups and retired people have helped and offered support. Traditional groups working with the new groups because they trust each other.

There were people from National Pensioners Convention who are also involved in Unite pensioners group. They too are learning from “new protest” actions. They have seen how groups are working, how they confront Councils for example, how leaflets are done and of course social media.

Ian Seddon  
*SOS Wirral*



**F**raternatnal and Sororal greetings from Merseyside FBU (Mark Rowe speaking).

Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service has been devastated by the attack of the Tory led coalition on the peoples fire service.

There have been £28m worth of cuts over 5 yrs. More than any other Fire and Rescue Service in the country. These spivs masquerading as a Government do not care if the people of Merseyside burn in their beds.

They have also launched a personal attack on firefighters by ripping up long standing pensions agreements. They expect firefighters to now work on the front line until we are 60 yrs old. If we cannot maintain our fitness merely for the crime of getting older then we will be forced out on a massively reduced pension, or dismissed for under capability, leaving us with no job and no pension.

The FBU have fought these attacks and have to date undertaken over 50 periods of strike action over the last 3 years.

The FBU will be announcing a further 24hr strike over the coming weeks.

We will continue to fight for Merseyside public's safety.

Austerity is an attack on the poorest workers in this country and is a redistribution of money from those who need it most to those who need it least

Solidarity for today's conference!

Mark Rowe, FBU



## Building the Resistance in Merseyside

**T**he primary aims of the first 'No Austerity' conference held on 14 February 2015, were to develop anti-austerity resistance in the city and Merseyside, forge links between the various grassroots campaigns, and to organise an organic, democratically-mandated anti-austerity programme for the upcoming elections. The conference was centred upon developing more democratic and participatory ways of doing and producing politics, with workshops and group discussions inviting participants to co-produce their programme for change.

### Building the movement

The conference represented the very early steps of movement building. There is a significant absence of the infrastructures necessary to sustain the development of a new, open and exciting class-based and leftist struggle that inspires people and is capable of generating new political ideas. Here, solidarity networks were formed and new energies created as the resistance wrote new chapters in the political history of the city.

### Forge new connections re-organise our struggle

We should not underestimate the importance of forging new connections – it's only through the development of these that new, political alternatives will develop – though we should be conscious of the need to broaden participation and diversity within the movement in order to build critical and more diverse arguments against austerity.

On 7 May, people in the UK will go to the polls to elect the new government. Facing the mainstream cross-party consensus of more austerity, and a technocratic popularity contest whereby those larger parties effectively compete over who can be the toughest on migration and the most ruthless in cutting the deficit.

It seems like the political horizons of the 'possible' have been reduced to almost nothing – the future is the present; no hope, and a further reduction in our living standards.

### Reorganising the left

So how can things be different? We cannot simply struggle for a return to the past. The social-democratic compromise is over; we now live in a 'zero-hours' climate, with precarity the new norm. The left wasn't adequately prepared for the crisis, and hasn't yet responded with the tools necessary to overturn capitalism's response – austerity.

The left and the working class is currently undergoing a process of reorganisation, where our ideas require rejuvenating and re-energising in order to meet changed conditions and the new challenges facing us today. There is a pressing need to develop more radical alternatives.

There is a pressing need to move beyond the current 'fire-fighting' of much of the left, simply defending an odd service. We must develop a progressive programme for change. The conference was the start. We're in it for the long haul. Join us on the demo on 25 April.

Josh Blamire  
@Josh Blamire

## End Zero Hour Contracts

**T**he use of zero hours contracts (ZHCs) has grown exponentially in recent years. Many local trade union and civil society campaigns are currently fighting against these exploitative contracts.

A new umbrella campaign is being organized called Liverpool Zero Hours Free Zone (LiverpoolZHFZ). The aim is to bring together those fighting the use of ZHCs, to share experience and tactics, and to support one another's campaigns wherever possible.

One benefit of this boldly titled umbrella campaign is it's increased public awareness - already featured in the Liverpool Echo and shortly to be covered by Channel 4 Dispatches.



We can help garner support from the public and pressurise politicians both locally and nationally. It is no secret that Liverpool City Council has made some positive noises regarding its use of ZHCs, whilst simultaneously outsourcing work to employers who are particularly guilty of using of ZHCs. With a large visible city-wide campaign we can point out this hypocrisy and hold the council to account.

LiverpoolZHFZ is about facilitating and supporting existing anti-ZHC campaigns, not taking over or replacing them. If you are interested in joining your branch's anti-ZHC campaign, or starting one - consider expressing an interest and together we can end these exploitative contracts once and for all - please email: [Liverpoolzhfz@gmail.com](mailto:Liverpoolzhfz@gmail.com)

## APPENDIX C: EMAIL INVITATION TO ACTIVISTS

Sent to: *Liverpool against the Cuts*

Date: September 2015

Hi all,

As those of you who know me will be well aware, I am currently studying for my PhD at Liverpool Uni. The project looks at how people in Liverpool are organising and fighting against the cuts, and what alternatives to austerity there are.

Over the next few months, I shall be hoping to conduct informal interviews with people involved in anti-cuts campaigns in Liverpool, in order to directly include your voices in the research. I would like ask you, broadly speaking:

- How and why you became involved in anti-cuts campaigns/organisations/parties?
- Why do you oppose austerity?
- What are your demands/what are the alternatives to austerity?

I hope that these conversations will contribute towards reflecting on what's happened so far, where we're up to, what we're doing well, and what we need to change.

The chats will last around an hour, and I would like to tape record them, if that's OK. I will ensure that your responses are completely confidential and, where requested, anonymised. We don't have to record if you don't want to. I can provide some questions in advance, although there is no set agenda and I would mainly like to hear about the issues that you think are important.

Unfortunately I have no means to pay anyone, but I am willing to reimburse any travel costs and provide refreshments (coffee, biscuits, beer...). I am happy to meet at any time and place of your convenience, though usually a café or pub tends to work best.

If this sounds like something you'd like to get involved in, please email me at [j.blamire@liv.ac.uk](mailto:j.blamire@liv.ac.uk) text/call me on XXXXXXXXXX, or catch me at the next meeting.

Solidarity,  
Josh

**Joshua Blamire**  
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University of Liverpool

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## APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR ACTIVISTS

### Interview Plan

#### Welcome

- Introduction to project
  - Why are you interested in this participants' views?
  - I will play devil's advocate.
  - I can pause the tape if there's anything you'd like to say off record.
- 

#### Theme 1: Personal Political Biographies

- How and why did you first get involved in politics?
  - How and why did you get involved in anti-cuts organisations?
- 

#### Theme 2: Analysis of Austerity

- What is your perspective on the debt narrative? *Who is to blame?*
- How are people fighting against austerity in Liverpool? Who is involved?
- How would you reflect on our aims and tactics?

*Council: Had you been elected, what would your tactics in the council chamber have been? How do elections work as a strategy?*

*Libraries: why the necessity to defend all Liverpool libraries, rather than just the ones under threat in our own neighbourhoods?*

- What are the solutions to austerity? How do we bring them about?
- 

#### Theme 3: Challenges & Provocations

*Prompts:*

- Firefighting?
- Neoliberal world; post-Fordism; consequences for organising?
- What is expected of Labour Council? Can we work with them? (Unite Community)

- Anderson: 1980s, 'Invest to Grow' – alternative strategies?
  - Alternatively: OK, Corbyn is anti-austerity > vote for him, the problems go away?
  - Big Society?
  - What is the movement for?
- 

#### **Theme 4: Reflections**

- Are there things you would like to see done differently in anti-cuts?
  - Have your views changed over time? Has our conversation changed your mind?
  - '*Another world is possible*'. What does that world look like to you?
  - Do you have a slogan or message? Is there anything else that you would like to report, or reflect upon?
  - I am soon talking to councillors – is there anything you'd like me to ask or say?
- 

#### **Interview Notes**

1. Reflections on the mood; atmosphere; background noise etc.

2. Verbal interactions

- *Did any questions create unease?*
- *Topics more keen to talk about than others?*

3. Non-verbal interactions

*Any observable points of note about non-verbal interactions, gestures etc.?*

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## APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR COUNCILLORS

### Councillor Interviews

- Introduction to project
    - This project involves ethnographic research and interviews with anti-cuts activists.
    - It is necessary to get all sides.
    - This is about getting your views on things I've observed.
    - If you want to say anything off the record, I can stop the tape.
- 
- I wonder if, first, you would mind telling me a bit about yourself.  
What is your role in the council?
    - How and why did you first become involved in politics?
  - So, the current economic situation both nationally and locally.  
What are the issues, and what are the solutions or options for solving it?
    - LCC suffering 58% cuts in real-terms.
    - Seem to be two strategies. 1) Cuts are necessary 2) Growing your way out of crisis through investment. Where do you fall within this debate?
  - What are the challenges facing Liverpool with regards to these tensions?
  - How is Liverpool City Council managing these challenges? In your opinion, what are the options?
    - 1) Dented Shield; explaining to people the problems, verbally pointing out the problem to government ministers, doing the best you can with limited resources to mitigate the problem. *The Anderson approach*.
    - 2) Overt confrontation – the *Militant approach*.
    - 3) Using the crisis to introduce more bottom-up, empowered forms of governance.

- How does Liverpool City Council relate to community organisations seeking to manage or resist the current austerity programme?
    - *Some people would argue* that the best solution is: manage the city professionally, show that you are a competent governing party, get elected nationally.
    - *Others:* we cannot wait for that. Labour Council of the 1980s made gains...
  - *Some campaigners argue that* LCC isn't doing enough to protect the city from austerity. They suggest that LCC should be more creative in defending services – voting against cuts, mobilising an anti-cuts movement, working with communities. What would you say in response?
  - *Some people would argue that* the best way forward for Liverpool is to grow the local economy – through the visitor economy – the solution is to encourage private-sector growth. The 80s ended up in a battle over arguing over the distribution of the pot, rather than about how we could grow the pot. *Others argue that* this approach is spatially and socially exclusive, that trickle-down economics doesn't work, and that what about places particularly in the north of the city. Where do you lie within this debate?
  - Are there, or can there be, alternatives to austerity, at both the local and national scale?
  - What is your vision for a post-austerity Liverpool?
  - Is there anything important that we haven't discussed?
-

## APPENDIX F: EMAIL INVITATION TO COUNCILLORS

Date: November 2015

Dear Councillor XXX,

My name is Joshua Blamire and I am a third-year PhD student in the Dept. of Geography & Planning at the University of Liverpool. I am conducting research into austerity in the UK, and Liverpool in particular. I know you are terribly busy, but I would really relish the opportunity to speak to you directly about issues surrounding austerity in Liverpool, and would really appreciate if you could possibly spare an hour of your time, at any place of your convenience, to provide a short interview for the purposes of the research. In particular, I'd love to hear your thoughts on:

- What kinds of challenges is Liverpool facing under the pressure of central government cuts?
- How is the City Council managing the imposition of those cuts?
- What governance strategies are being deployed to mitigate the impacts of austerity?
- How does the City Council relate to community organisations seeking to both alleviate the effects of, and to resist, the cuts?
- Are there, or can there be, alternatives to austerity, at both the local and national scale?

The research will further our knowledge about the impacts of austerity, and stands to make a significant contribution to social justice. Any contribution you could make would be keenly appreciated and highly valued.

If you would be willing to participate in an interview, please email me at [j.blamire@liv.ac.uk](mailto:j.blamire@liv.ac.uk) or call me on [XXXXXXXXXX]. I am, of course, happy to meet at any time and place of your convenience as aforementioned.

Kind regards,

Josh

**Joshua Blamire**  
Postgraduate Researcher  
Power, Space & Cultural Change  
Department of Geography & Planning  
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**APPENDIX G: PARTICIPATION CONSENT FORM****Committee on Research Ethics**

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**PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

**Title of Research Project:** Fighting the Cuts in Liverpool

**Researcher(s):** Joshua Blamire

**Please  
tick box**

- |   |                          |
|---|--------------------------|
| 1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated [15-09-14] for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my rights being affected. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. I understand that, under the Data Protection Act, I can at any time ask for access to the information I provide and I can also request the destruction of that information if I wish.  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. I agree to take part in the above study.   | <input type="checkbox"/> |

---

Participant Name

---

Date

---

Signature

---

Researcher

---

Date

---

Signature

**Researcher Contact Details**

Joshua Blamire  
Roxby Building  
University of Liverpool  
Liverpool  
L69 7ZT  
Tel: 07825215116  
Email: [j.blamire@liv.ac.uk](mailto:j.blamire@liv.ac.uk)

## APPENDIX H: PARTICIPATION INFORMATION SHEET

### Committee on Research Ethics

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#### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

**Title:** Fighting the Cuts in Liverpool

**Researcher:** Joshua Blamire

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask if you would like more information or if there is anything that you do not understand. Remember, you do not have to accept this invitation and should only agree if you are willing to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

**1. What is the purpose of this study?**

This study investigates the opposition to the Central Government and Council cuts in Liverpool. It looks at what the arguments for and against the cuts are, and more specifically asks how people in Liverpool are reacting to them. The study is particularly focussed on how people are organising as groups or communities to resist the cuts, although this may not be why you have been approached.

**2. Why have I been chosen to take part?**

I would like to hear the voices of those people in Liverpool who are affected by the cuts, particularly those involved in organising and fighting against them, and/or are promoting alternatives to them.

**3. Do I have to take part?**

Participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time without explanation and without incurring a disadvantage.

**4. What will happen if I take part?**

You will be asked to provide a short interview lasting no more than one hour. This is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. A list of questions can be provided in advance if you require them.

**5. Are there any risks in taking part?**

I do not envisage any disadvantages or risks in you taking part in the research. If you should experience any discomfort or disadvantage as part of the research, this should be made known to the researcher immediately.

**6. What if I am unhappy or if there is a problem?**

If you are unhappy, or if there is a problem, please feel free to contact me or my supervisor via the details below, and we will try to help. If you remain unhappy or have a complaint which you feel you cannot come to us with then you should contact the Research Governance Officer on 0151 794 8290 (ethics@liv.ac.uk). When contacting the Research Governance Officer, please provide details of the name or description of the study (so that it can be identified), the researcher involved, and the details of the complaint you wish to make.

**7. Will my participation be kept confidential?**

All personal data will be kept confidential and, if necessary, anonymised and pseudonyms given. Only the researcher and supervisor shall have access to the data, which shall only be used for the purposes of this research study.

**8. What will happen to the results of the study?**

The results of the study will be made available to you prior to any potential publication. You will not be identifiable from the results unless you specifically consent to be so.

**9. What will happen if I want to stop taking part?**

You can withdraw at any time, without explanation and without incurring disadvantage. Results up to the period of withdrawal may be used, unless you request that they are destroyed and that no further use is made of them.

**10. Who can I contact if I have further questions?**

You should contact the researcher or project supervisor:

**Researcher Contact Details**

Joshua Blamire  
Roxby Building  
University of Liverpool  
Liverpool  
L69 7ZT  
Email: [j.blamire@liv.ac.uk](mailto:j.blamire@liv.ac.uk)

**Supervisor Contact Details**

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